Tokyo Ravens Volume 04

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東京レジェンズ 4
GIRL RETURN
6 days in nest
あざの耕平
KouheiAzano
ファンタジア文庫

あざの耕平
●あざのこうへい

「神仙酒コンチェルト」でデビュー。徳島県出身。代表作として「Dクラッカーズ」「BLACK BLOOD BROTHERS」シリーズなど。今回は長編と短編が半分ずつという構成になっています。二年になった春虎たちを襲う災難。そして、彼らが振り返る慌ただしい日常を、併せてお楽しみ下さい。

イラスト：すみ兵
カバーデザイン：伸童舎

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東京レイヴンズ4
GIRL RETURN & days in nest I

あざの耕平

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東京レイヴンズ4
GIRL RETURN & days in nest I

土御門夏目（つちみかどなつめ）——芯が強くて楚々（そそ）とした、春虎（はるとら）自慢の幼なじみ。……の、はずだった。半年前までは。

しかし現在。「このバカ虎！」。半年ぶりに再会した幼なじみは、陰陽塾きっての秀才で口が悪くて素直じゃなくて、とある理由で男装女子になっていた!?　そして、その男装女子に日々振り回されている、日本一ツイていない少年、土御門春虎。「夏目君とデキてる……ホモなんでしょ？」「いや実は幼女好きだって」。クラスメイト曰（いわ）く『ホモだと思ったらロリコンだった』。心ない噂と運の悪さに苦しむ春虎。しかも二年になった二人を襲ったのは、あの夏の日の「嵐」！　大騒動の学園生活を経て波乱の新学期がいま始まる!?

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東京レイヴンズ4 GIRL RETURN & days in nest I

「先輩！陰陽塾（ここ）に来ればきっとまた会えるって、あたしずっと思ってたんです！」
春虎先輩じゃありませんか！
東京レイヴンズ 4
GIRL RETURN & days in nest
波乱の新学期が幕を開けた

「え？」
「……幼女だわ。可愛い狐の幼女の式神」
「幼女……」

『神童』対『黒子（シャドウ）』。
『十二神将』の中でも、
木暮はニッと笑って、
相当な珍カードだ」
塾講師をからかう

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TOKYO RAVENS

Chapter 1 - Star Raid

In front of me was a group of unfamiliar faces of a similar age as mine. That person was in there, I thought, my expression inquiring.

Actually, I didn't care at all, nor could I possibly care. It was just that this person was definitely panicked right now, and I really wanted to laugh and mock that stupid appearance.

Strangely, I found that person without much trouble.

The moment our gazes crossed--

Part 1

The cherry blossoms were in bloom, dyeing Shibuya Street in pink colors of spring.

It was a nice spring day, with a sweet smell vaguely floating in the air. The big city that was normally bustling and uninteresting was now unusually at ease, an atmosphere that could only be experienced in this time.

"This is probably what's called the joys of spring." Tsuchimikado Harutora spoke cheerfully as he walked on the familiar road.

This place was the road to the Onmyouji cultivation facility - the Onmyou Academy. On the road his gaze slightly rose, looking at the cherry blossoms blooming along the road. The wind blew from time to time, and petals would float off the branches accordingly, lightly dancing in the wind. That image was as if the cherry blossoms were frolicking elegantly, enjoying the spring day's light.

The extremely elegant Yoshino cherry blossoms had drops of red amidst pure white. In comparison, Harutora wore a dark bluish-black Onmyou Academy uniform that resembled Heian-era imperial clothing. He hadn't been used to wearing the Onmyou Academy uniform in the beginning, but now he was already completely suited to it.

"I thought a place like Tokyo would be noisy and crowded and that we wouldn't feel the seasons changing at all..... But it's not actually like that. Not only are there more parks, there's green everywhere if you pay close attention."

"It's just unfortunate that it's all green planted by humans." Ato Touji who walked by his side replied to Harutora's feelings, his words ironic, showing his unique style. Touji wore the same uniform as Harutora and had a bandanna tied around his forehead, freely tying back his long hair. Even if his tone was tart, Touji's gaze was actually pointed towards the cherry blossoms over his head as well, but instead of saying that he was appreciative, it was better to say that the scene seemed like the cherry blossoms naturally drew in his gaze.

"Don't be that bothersome. Even if it's a city, it's still cherry blossoms that are blooming." Harutora spoke, smiling happily.

Harutora liked the spring, perhaps because his name contained the character for spring, and also because the weather was pleasant and felt good. In particular, this year's spring was the first that he welcomed after coming to Tokyo, so it was full of even more refreshing feelings.

But to be honest, it wasn't just because of the coming of spring that Harutora's mood was this lively.

"Harutora! You'll be late if you don't hurry up."

The girl who was walking ahead of them turned around, warning the leisurely strolling pair of boys behind her.

When the girl turned around, the pink ribbon tying her long hair whipped around accordingly, her hair flying towards the petals in the air. The petals performed a soundless dance, as if inviting the black hair to dance together.

"How long do you plan on being excited for, even though you successfully advanced to the second year? The entrance ceremony is going to be held today once we arrive at the academy, so don't even think about showing off by being late in front of the new students." Impatience was written all over the girl's face as she sternly told him off.

The girl's childishness had never completely receded, and she showed a shy presence and an androgynous charm. Her clear eyes gave off a firm light, making her charm even clearer. She was a beautiful girl; however, she was wearing the same black uniform as Harutora and Touji, a male uniform. The girl was bound by 'family tradition', and passed her days as a male while hiding the fact that she was a female.

She had been born in a famous Onmyoudou family and was the next heir of the Tsuchimikado - Tsuchimikado Natsume. She and the branch family son Harutora were childhood friends, as well as the girl he regarded as his master - as he was a shikigami, also following 'family tradition'.

"Also, did you perhaps forget how appalling your grades were as soon as you rose to the second year? Frankly, you don't have the leisure to get excited right now. You should be feeling a strong sense of crisis instead." Natsume furrowed her brows, her hands crossed over her slim waist.

Only Harutora and Touji knew the fact that Natsume was a girl. They glanced at each other after hearing Natsume's proclamation.

"Hah..... Harutora, did you hear that? The main family's genius won't give up, she's still trying to ask that a branch family member like you get grades that won't shame the Tsuchimikado name."

"Yeah..... Natsume really is different from others. She was classmates with me for half a year and she can still hold on to that kind of hope."

"Should that be called idealism or delusion?"

"No no no, you should say she just has a superhumanly firm will."

"She just hasn't seen reality clearly."

"Nonsense, it's not like it's completely impossible."

"......You two....." In a huff, Natsume angrily stared at the two who had gotten carried away. The eyebrows that had been raised before now trembled slightly.

"Don't ask too much of him, Natsume. It's not that Harutora doesn't have any self-awareness, but his level was originally about the same as an outsider and he entered the nation's premier Onmyou Academy half a year late. He barely managed to pass the advancement exam, and today he can finally advance officially, so you can't blame him for being a bit excited." Touji took the opportunity to leisurely intervene.

"Hey Touji, what does that mean, I thought you transferred into the Onmyou Academy halfway like me."

"I 'advanced' to the second year, which brings a different level of emotion than 'finally being able to succeed in advancing' to the second year like you. It's like how a drama is more fascinating with a twisting plot."

"Huh? Is, is that true? I even feel a bit embarrassed when you say it like that."

"......Tch......How worthy, Harutora. I didn't expect you to use that move."

"What are you saying?"

Touji put on a self-derisive smile, clicking his tongue regretfully. Harutora stood still blankly upon seeing this, confused and unable to comprehend. Natsume listened to their exchange from the side, helplessly sighing. "Bakatora." After she muttered that, she smiled.

"But....."

"Yeah?"

"Things really got interesting. I never thought that such a serious incident would happen the day of the exam." Natsume spoke, her expression revealing seriousness and a bit of bitterness. Seeing Natsume's expression and hearing those words, Harutora also unconsciously straightened his back.

After a while, "......That's true." Touji also expressed agreement, once again moving his legs that had stopped at some point. "After all, it was just a simple practical exam, but ended up in a 'Type-Chimera' spiritual disaster attack and the Twelve Divine Generals. We got involved in a spiritual disaster terrorist attack, and in the end even the famous Ashiya Doman also came out to make trouble."

"Yeah, thinking of all of that, it's really unbelievable....."

"Also--"

"Also?"

"A stupid little oni came out."

Touji grinned ironically at the inquisitive Harutora, and Harutora immediately returned the same smile to his friend.

Harutora and the others' advancement exam - the practical exam that had been held about a month earlier. The contents of the exam had been to purify a manmade spiritual disaster, but at the same time, Yakou fanatics had used magic to unleash terrorist attacks all over Tokyo, and therefore both the Onmyou Academy and the Onmyou Agency had all fallen into chaos.

What's more, the after-effects left in Touji's body that he had received from coming in contact with a spiritual disaster - the after-effects left by a spiritual disaster in the past - had broken out again, and the oni sleeping deeply inside his body - the 'Type-Ogre' spiritual disaster - broke through the seal and became active, even leading to him showing signs of spiritual disaster transformation.

After that, they had clashed with the member of the National First-Class Onmyouji - known as the Twelve Divine Generals - who had originally come to purify the spiritual disaster, causing simmering tensions. Then, Natsume had agreed to the Exorcist Bureau's request and headed out to assist the purification of the mobile spiritual disasters. One of the spiritual disasters escaped, and Natsume, Harutora, Touji, and others were forced to face it themselves and deal with the dangerous situation on their own. It was really a frenzied day.

"......I feel like that day was worth more than the half-year of living at the Onmyou Academy." Touji spoke calmly, shrugging his shoulders.

In the end, the spiritual disasters had finally been purified right as the government was about to announce that they were entering a state of emergency. It was all over the news for a few days after the incident ended because it had created such a big effect.

Since that incident, Touji hadn't been simply sealing the oni inside his body. Rather, he had accepted someone's guidance and was learning how to use the oni instead. His homeroom teacher Ohtomo and the instructors who had once been exorcists were responsible for teaching him and proctoring him for practical exams.

"......There will be more and more practical skills curriculum when the second year starts, so it'll be shameful if you don't control it well."

"If I truly can't control it, I don't think shame will be enough to deal with the problems."

Harutora couldn't help but smile wryly upon hearing Touji's response.

Harutora hadn't slacked off in training his practical skills either. As a shikigami, he had to protect his master Natsume, and he didn't think he could overcome the obstacles ahead if he didn't put in solid hard work.

"In any case, Natsume, compared to when we entered, we and Touji have all grown quite a bit, don't you think so? I'm not too sure what the content of the second-year practical skills curriculum will be, but in any case, we'll take it one step at a time, so you don't have to worry." Harutora put his hands behind his head, raising his head to look at the cherry blossoms and speaking leisurely.

Natsume shook her head helplessly, but those eyes that looked at her childhood friend with poor grades were tender and couldn't conceal her joy. Even if she complained, she understood more than anyone how seriously Harutora was working and how hard he persevered. It was just unfortunate that his results were still unsatisfying.

"Let me first warn you, Harutora, no matter how much practical skills curriculum the second year has, it doesn't mean there won't be any lectures at all. Especially since we'll be studying more specialized material since there's less time for lecture, the curriculum from before will practically be nothing in comparison."

"Huh? Is it going to become that hard?'

"Right. Don't think that you won't have to worry about the second year if you can just clear the practical skills - that way of thinking is hugely mistaken."

"I, I didn't think that....."

It seemed that he really had such ideas in his heart. Natsume's expression was concerned as she looked at the panicked Harutora.

"Practical skills, huh....." Touji murmured. "I also thought that at least they wouldn't be as boring as lectures..... But honestly, it seems that no matter how proficient you are in the practical skills you learn in school, it won't be of much use when you go outside."

"That's not the case. What nonsense are you saying, Touji?" Natsume's almond eyes opened wide, her gaze turning to Touji. "The Onmyou Academy is the springboard for specialized Onmyouji, and almost all of the students immediately become qualified once they graduate and become specialized Onmyouji. There are even specialized Onmyouji who especially come to the Onmyou Academy to take the third year classes. The practical skills curriculum in particular is frighteningly difficult."

Touji's casual remark led Natsume to rebuke him agitatedly. Harutora, who listened to those words from the side, marveled in admiration, nodding his head.

Truthfully, the Onmyou Academy had a long history of fostering quite a bit of excellent talent, and could be described as the premier Onmyouji cultivation institution in the nation. Among the national governing body of magic, there was a far higher proportion of Onmyou Academy graduates than from other pipelines.

"That's for a normal specialized Onmyouji....." Touji cast a knowing look in the direction of the surprise Natsume. "Once you encounter a legendary Onmyouji, it doesn't matter how good your grades are."

"That....." Natsume had nothing to reply with for a while, and Harutora also muttered: "That old man....." and frowned.

The three of them all happened to think of the final scene of the incident a while back. After purifying the Nue - the 'Type-Chimera' spiritual disaster - a black limousine had appeared from the shadows in front of Harutora and the others. The old man in the limousine had spoken to the three of them, and then announced his name after Natsume questioned him. At the time, the old man had announced that his name was Ashiya Doman.

The Tsuchimikado family that Harutora and Natsume were born to had been active since the Heian era, and the uniquely great Onmyouji Abe no Seimei was the family's

ancestor. Ashiya Doman was purported to be Abe no Seimei's rival Onmyouji. From Harutora, Natsume, and Touji's point of view, he was a legendary person.

".....To think he said his name, what exactly is that old man scheming....."

"Is he really the original?"

"B, Bakatora! The original - how could he be the original, Ashiya Doman was a person from the Heian era."

"Normally it wouldn't be possible, but....."

"But even in the modern era, there are monsters like the Twelve Divine Generals running amok, so that old man isn't necessarily..... You can't deny that kind of possibility, right?"

"Those people aren't really at the level of running amok....." Natsume had originally wanted to rebuke Touji's speculations, but unfortunately she spoke softly. Though he had left a strong impression on them, they knew nothing about that man.

Harutora furrowed his brows, crossing his arms.

"Hey, Natsume, the Onmyou Agency hasn't explained what kind of person that old man is, right?"

"Yeah..... I asked Kurahashi-san to contact them and checked with the Onmyou Agency a few times, but Kogure-san and even that Mystical Investigator named Hirata refused to speak about the situation in detail....."

"Maybe the Onmyou Agency doesn't have a hold of much information." Touji said. Natsume tightened her lips, nodding her head.

"It's not like that's impossible. We can only say for certain that he's an Onmyouji active behind the scenes, and..... He's extraordinarily powerful."

Natsume had been labeled a genius in the Onmyou Academy, but honestly, she was just a student and couldn't be fully independent. Even if she understood that the opponent's power couldn't be estimated, she could only rely on blind guesses as for how 'powerful' he was.

"In any case, never mind whether he's the real person or a fake, that person should probably know that you two are Tsuchimikados - the descendants of Abe no Seimei. If he knows, yet deliberately appeared before us announcing his name as Ashiya Doman, then it looks like things won't end so easily. He'll definitely make more trouble in the future." Touji spoke with a serious gaze.

"....."

"Of course, that person couldn't possibly not know that Natsume might be Tsuchimikado Yakou's reincarnation."

"......Probably." Natsume replied bitterly.

Tsuchimikado Yakou had been the head of the Tsuchimikado family during the Pacific War era, and was the originator of the Imperial Onmyoudou that was the basis of the current officially used magic General Onmyoudou. In other words, he could be called the father of modern magic, a genius practitioner. On the other hand, because of a certain failed magic rite that he performed, he was also the culprit who had brought about the frequent spiritual disasters.

According to outside 'rumors', Natsume was Tsuchimikado Yakou's reincarnation. Natsume herself was unsure of its truth, but she suffered from the rumors and there were often insane Yakou fanatics trying to approach her. It was also to protect Natsume that Harutora didn't dare to slack off in his hard work.

"Some day, I might need to match magic with Ashiya Doman - like my ancestor. Just thinking about it gives me chills." Natsume spoke with a forced relaxation.

Honestly, the opponent was a first-class practitioner. If he truly tried something, Natsume and the others would be helpless to contend. The only thing they could count on was the organization they belonged to..... At best, they could only rely on the Onmyou Academy coming forward to help.

".....Yeah, whatever - don't think about it too much!"

Harutora shouted, grinning at the two people behind him. "It's troublesome, but thinking your brain to pieces is no use. We should just focus on what we can do right now." Harutora spoke cheerfully, not sounding forced at all. Natsume and Touji both showed complex expressions, both silent for a while.

Just then, a cherry blossom petal danced lightly with the wind, quietly landing on Harutora's head. Touji suddenly eased up, a wry smile spilling onto his mouth.

".....The cherry blossoms really suit you, Harutora."

"Huh? Wh, What are you saying?"

"Like a field of flowers or a flower-viewing party."

Faced with his good friend's teasing analogy, Harutora blinked blankly with the petal on his head.

Natsume finally relaxed, smiling wryly and saying: ".....That's true, it's no use to think too much."

Even if they couldn't become negligent out of optimism, there was no meaning in losing their outlook because of pessimism. It was better to conquer the challenges before them than become anxious or even give up because of things that were meaningless or those that they could do nothing about.

"Ah, hold on! Right now isn't the time to chat about such things!"

"What's wrong, Natsume, you don't have to get that tense, right?"

"Bakatora! You have to be tense! We'll be late if this drags on!"

Natsume cried out, hurriedly breaking into a run. "Huh?" Harutora took out his phone to check the time, and his face went stiff accordingly. At the same time, Touji had already chased behind Natsume a step ahead of him.

"Wait for me, Natsume! Touji!"

"Oh no! We're going to be late on the first day of the new term!"

"......We should just skip the entrance ceremony entirely."

"No! How can a Tsuchimikado family member be late to or deliberately not attend the serious ceremony....."

"Well, Harutora's already managed to fail tests and get after-school tutoring."

Natsume didn't have the energy to rebuke Touji's teasing, running on the cherry blossom-lined road with a changed expression. Touji ran behind her and Harutora chased after the two of them.

The spring light was bright.

The three of them didn't know that the end of spring was inside the Onmyou Academy, waiting for the three of them with a full smile.

Part 2

The entrance ceremony was held in the magic practice field underneath the academy building.

The magic practice field was normally used for practical training of first-class magic, and it was set up like a big sports field, with spectator seats encircling an arena. The Onmyou Academy students were arranged into orderly groups in the arena that was about as large as three or four basketball fields, and people who seemed like parents or relatives of the new students could be seen in the spectator seats.

There were altars set up inside the arena that were used as podiums during the entrance ceremony. Right now, there was a teacher speaking to the new students.

Harutora and Touji had transferred into the Onmyou Academy in the summer, hence this year was their first time attending the entrance ceremony, and this was also their first time seeing all of the Onmyou Academy students gathered together.

The new student group was in the front of the arena, the third-year students were in the back right, with the second-year students on the left. Harutora stood in between Natsume and Touji and looked at the back of new students anxiously.

".....Harutora, don't look around everywhere."

"Uh..... But aren't you concerned?"

The students who were able to overcome the obstacle of testing into the Onmyou Academy were the exceptionally talented individuals among those who aimed to become Onmyouji. Though Harutora had gradually grown his self-confidence, in the end he had only been in this world for half a year, and he still couldn't completely erase the thoughts that he was an outsider. On one hand, he was very curious about how powerful the strengths of his new kouhais would be, and he couldn't help but worry about whether he had grown enough to act as their senpai.

...Of course I'm concerned.....

He definitely couldn't win against them in terms of knowledge. Thinking of this, he became even more panicked.

"But....."

"Hm?"

"The new students this year seem abnormally tense. I didn't feel it at the time, but maybe that's how it looks in the eyes of others." Natsume spoke casually.

...Tense?

Harutora sized up the new students again, noticing that there was indeed a portion of the new students - especially the new students who were standing near the front row - who were particularly uneasy.

Were they tense because they were in front of the speaker? But rather than tense, those students seemed like they were preparing to run for their life at a moment's notice.....

...Why?

He couldn't see clearly in front of him because he was a bit distant, so Harutora wondered, but he couldn't make any progress understanding the situation. In addition, it wasn't just the new students who made him concerned.

".....Hey, Natsume. You said the practical curriculum would increase when we started the second year and that we'd have classes together with the third years, right?"

"Yeah, I said so."

"The Onmyou Academy doesn't have club activities, and there weren't any opportunities in the first year to interact with the senpais, doesn't that concern you?"

After saying this, Harutora turned his gaze towards the third-year group. "What kind of people are they..... The magic they use should be more powerful than us right now, right?"

".....I'm sure they have that kind of power. Frankly, the second year is when most students choose to withdraw."

"No way! Is that true?"

"Hush, quiet down, don't yell that loudly."

"S, Sorry..... But, why would so many people leave?"

"Because the practical curriculum increases." Natsume lowered her voice, replying quietly to Harutora's cautious question. "To be honest, a job like an Onmyouji focuses a lot on natural talent. Even if you understand the lectures, the 'difference' in talent will immediately show up once the practical curriculum arrives. Of course, it's not impossible to make up the difference with hard work..... But it's not a simple thing to continue working hard after seeing first-hand that your ability isn't as good as others."

Upon hearing Natsume bring up the cruel reality, Harutora's face went a bit pale. But he only noticed after Natsume said this that there were indeed much less third-year students compared to the number of second-year students. Since the number of students entering the academy every year shouldn't change much, the truth might be as Natsume said, that there were quite a few students who chose to give up before advancing to the third year.

Harutora also felt pained when Onmyouji talent was mentioned. Harutora didn't actually have the natural spirit-seeing talent of 'seeing' aura, which was the most basic qualification separating Onmyouji from other people. Since he lacked this talent, Harutora had studied at a normal high school even though he had been a

member of the branch family of the famous Tsuchimikado family, and he hadn't had any contact with magic before last summer.

Now, Harutora could already sense aura. This had to be attributed to the magic Natsume had used for him.

Under Harutora's left eye was a pentagram mark. That was the pattern Natsume had drawn when she had chosen him as her shikigami, and at the same time it was magic that let Harutora, who didn't have the spirit-seeing ability, 'see' aura. Hence, it could be said that Harutora wouldn't have possessed the Onmyouji qualifications if he hadn't become Natsume's shikigami.

Regardless of how firm of a will one had, it was ability that decided the crucial factor of strength and weakness.

Maybe that situation was the same for every field, but it was particularly evident for practitioners. This was the main reason why the world believed that the magic community was closed to outsiders.

"......And also, the Onmyou Academy practical curriculum contents are extremely difficult. The current third-years are the ones who held on under the challenge of that kind of curriculum without giving up, and the students who just advanced to the second year can't compare to their strength. Though they still haven't obtained qualification, they can already be considered semi-professional Onmyouji."

"......S, Semi-pro....." Harutora swallowed hard. The third-year group now seemed like a powerful gathering of elites, and the advice Natsume had mentioned when they were going to school sank deeply into him.

...I really can't be carefree.....

However, "......I don't know how strong those people are." When Harutora and Natsume heard Touji murmur leisurely, they immediately looked at him. "I can't

imagine there are many of them who have purified a Nue. Never mind the new students, even the third-years are definitely the same." He glanced askance at the two, showing a self-confident smile.

Harutora and Natsume looked at each other, 'that's true' written all over their face, and broke out into smiles.

"Yeah..... that's right."

It had only been half a year since he decided to become an Onmyouji, and he definitely couldn't stop here.

...I don't need to fear.

Since he had fought with all his power all the way here, he had accumulated quite a bit of actual battle experience even if the results hadn't been satisfactory. One of the things he was the most proud of was that he would stand tall and face whatever kind of situation he encountered. It didn't matter if he failed eventually, as all he needed to do was accept that outcome and continue working hard.

Just then, the sound of applause suddenly rang out. The teacher's speech had probably ended. The three of them hastily joined the applause. They completely hadn't heard the speech of the teacher on the podium because they had been too engrossed in chatting. How unfortunate. Harutora smiled wryly.

After the teacher stepped down, the principal Kurahashi Miyo stood on the podium next.

She stood in front of the microphone, introducing herself with a calm tone: "Hello, students. I am the Onmyou Academy principal, Kurahashi Miyo--"

A small old woman who matched her kimono completely and who gave off an elegant air from her entire body stood on the podium. From her external appearance and her actions, it was really hard to associate her with the person in charge of the

premier Onmyouji cultivation institution in the nation. And actually, her personality was quite whimsical, as Harutora knew extremely well. He also knew that she was extremely inscrutable, different from the feeling her behavior gave off.

...There isn't anything special in her greetings, but it feels like there are words between the lines.

Harutora distractedly thought this as he listened to the principal greet the new students. He had once met the principal in her office before, and maybe it was because he was familiar with her personality that those thoughts emerged. Right now, Harutora also understood well that she was a trustworthy and reliable principal.

"My greeting ends here. Now, I want to encourage all of the new students, as well as all of the students who have advanced to a new level, to believe in yourselves, develop every day, and improve your strength." The principal finished her greeting and applause rang out again.

The ceremony ended amidst the sound of applause. Next up was to properly enter the first class of the second year.

But, "Oh my, that's bad, I forgot that I had a matter to announce." Just as the principal was about to step down, she seemed to think of something, returning to the front of the microphone. The applause suddenly stopped and some clamor arose in the area. Harutora and the others stared at the stage in incomprehension.

"This year's new students - the forty-eighth class, has enrolled a student with 'special experience'. This student has already obtained Onmyouji qualifications, and due to certain reasons along with the strong urging from the person herself, the Onmyou Academy has decided to permit her to enter as a special student." The principal said.

After hearing the principal's words, the area which silence had reigned over went into an uproar, especially the students near the front row - those students whose

peculiar 'tension' that Natsume had pointed out earlier - and they all seemed panicked, whispering to each other.

No way - It really is - It's her - Unbelievable--

Excited words continued rising up in bursts. "......What's going on?" Touji couldn't help but wonder, looking over at those people.

The principal on the podium smiled.

"It's rare to have this opportunity, so I will ask her to take the stage and say hello to all of you. Everyone here has probably heard about her, so I'll introduce her simply. This new student is the current youngest National First-Class Onmyouji, known as the 'Child Prodigy'--"

With those words, Harutora, Natsume, and Touji's thinking momentarily lost their directions and idled.

"Dairenji Suzuka-san."

The incident began that summer.

... 'I heard rumors about you, and I've wanted to meet you for a long time'

The girl was dressed up in goth loli-styled finery, and her provocative and haughty cold smile merged extremely naturally with her immature appearance that radiated a dangerous air, strangely fascinating yet uncoordinated, like a blooming southern flower hiding a deadly poison.

... 'Stop joking around! I don't need your sympathy!'

Confident, strong, ferocious, unrestricted.

Stubborn, overexerting, simple, lonely.

... '.....Bunch of fools.'

That chaotic encounter had completely changed Harutora's life.

".....What?" The three of them cried out in unison.

The area momentarily erupted in a clamor. As if called out by the noise, a girl walked out of the group of new students in the front row.

Her dyed blonde hair was tied into ponytails, hanging down onto the back he had seen before. She wasn't wearing the goth loli-style finery from back then, but instead wore the Onmyou Academy's imperial-style pure white girl's uniform.

The girl walked onto the podium, turning to face the arena. Her small face was disproportionate to her round eyes. He definitely wasn't mistaken, she was the mastermind behind the incident last summer that had made Harutora decide to become an Onmyouji, Dairenji Suzuka.

"Uwah." The students couldn't help but cry out.

On the other hand--

".....No way....."

".....Ah....."

"......!"

Touji and Harutora gaped as if not yet over the shock. Natsume's face went ashen, her eyes widening.

...That person.....

Suzuka proudly straightened her shoulders, passing through the stage and walking towards the position that the principal had given to her, standing in front of the microphone. She looked down disdainfully in front of all of the students of the Onmyou Academy, not seeming frightened at all.

That distinct midsummer night emerged in Harutora's mind. On the fireworks festival, in the typhoon's rain, on the altar of the Taizan Fukun Ritual. He recalled each and every one of Suzuka's words and deeds as if they were from yesterday.

The irritable, hot-tempered, and emotional girl who held absolute confidence in her own strength--

"Hi everyone, thanks to Principal Kurahashi for introducing me, I'm Dairenji Suzuka!"

A bell-like, delicate, sweet, and lively voice brought an impact that on a certain level was even heavier than when she had appeared before him.

".....What?"

Harutora didn't get what had happened for a while, and Touji and Natsume couldn't warp their head around it either, blankly standing in place.

Suzuka grinned lightly, showing an angelic smile. Everyone present - regardless of gender - cheered.

"I'm really nervous today..... But, I'm very happy! It was always my dream to study Onmyoudou with students my own age, and today my dream is finally realized!"

Oh, right, it was a dream. Harutora unconsciously laughed a few times. No wonder such a strange scene had emerged and he even couldn't help but feel dizzy. Everything was all just a dream.....

"Classmates and senpais, there are still a lot of things I don't understand about Onmyoudou, so please feel free to teach me." Suzuka spoke unabashedly, and then showed another sweet smile.

Applause rang out like thunder, more enthusiastic compared to the applause after the teacher's or the principal's greetings, and there were even people who whistled excitedly.

Suzuka bashfully smiled on the podium, lightly waving her right hand to respond to the students' cheers. At the same time, she tilted chin slightly, the angle of the tilt obviously calculated carefully, as if she were making herself out to be a young idol.

".....This is..... What the hell....." Harutora was at a loss. Suddenly, Suzuka's gaze, directed towards the gathering place, stopped in Harutora's direction. Harutora's body froze and Suzuka also stopped waving.

The pair's gazes crossed, and Harutora instinctively felt like something was bad, but he had nowhere to run. Suzuka stared at him, her face clearly showing that she 'recognized' Harutora, just like how Harutora also knew Suzuka.

...Uh.

It was just a brief moment, but Harutora felt it to be unbearably long. Suzuka stared at the stunned, frozen Harutora - and a blush spread across her face.

.....Huh?

Harutora's tension vanished, but it was still too early for him to relax. After a flash of what seemed to be an embarrassed appearance, an obvious change appeared on Suzuka's expression, as if making Harutora doubt whether he had just seen wrong.

A smile.

It was vastly different from the cute smile just now, the surreptitious sneer of a snake noticing a frog instead. Frankly, compared to the fake smile that had roused the audience before, this smile conformed more with Suzuka's style - at least with the Suzuka of Harutora's impressions.

Strangely, Harutora relaxed instead when he saw this smile of hers.

She was really the Suzuka from that time.

But, maybe that kind of thought was a sign that Harutora was unconsciously beginning to avoid reality.

Suzuka slowly inhaled.

"Senpai! Isn't that Harutora-senpai?!"

Harutora felt like gazes in the area shot towards him from all directions.

Suzuka deliberately widened her eyes.

"I'm so happy, I knew I could see senpai if I came to the Onmyou Academy, I've been waiting for this day! I didn't think I would run into you so quickly--"

Hey, hurry up and stop talking, don't say any more.

Harutora prayed silently in vain, as unfortunately it still didn't change reality. Blood drained out of his entire body and his consciousness seemed to drift into limbo. Touji murmured: "...Harutora" to encourage him, but the voice reached his ears yet didn't enter his mind, as if he was a frog being stared at by a vicious snake.

But compared to this..... What about Natsume? Was Natsume okay right now? In front of Suzuka..... Ahh, no good, he couldn't turn around. The current Harutora didn't have the courage to turn around and check his childhood friend's reactions.

The clamor in the gathering place became more and more animated.

Harutora - Who - Tsuchimikado - The branch family's--

Bits of conversation came one after another, exchanging and sharing information in moments. Then, the students' interest evolved into a huge question.

What kind of relationship did the two of them have?

Principal Kurahashi on the stage walked by Suzuka's side, asking the question in all of the students' hearts.

"Oh my, Suzuka-san, do you know each other?"

Suzuka replied: "Yes." Like she had been waiting for someone to ask that question. She turned back around in a rush, her hands still holding the microphone.

"He's the first person I kissed!"

The chaotic new term kicked off like that.

Chapter 2 - The Rumored Pair

Part 1

"Hi~ I took the chance to come see you - Hey, don’t go, Jin, don't stand up in such a rush, and what's up with that hateful expression? I even came to find you, so you should be a bit - Ah, hold on, huh? Strange? You want to - Tch, what are you doing? Wait, Wait a moment, wait a moment! Hey, Jin?"

On the second floor of the academy building, inside the faculty office of all the teachers. The office was normally giving off a calm and tranquil atmosphere unlike the students' classrooms, but once this man walked in, it instantly set off bursts of whispers in the office.

However, it was no wonder, as after all that man's strength could be called outstanding among the whole nation, a famous, brilliant Onmyouji.

He was close to thirty, wearing an age-old aviator jacket and tattered jeans, and for some reason woven sandals were on his feet. He was dressed casually, but it didn't reduce his heroic spirit - since his body carried a lively, boyish heroic spirit, he didn't seem threatening no matter how strange and sharp his gaze was.

He was a National First-Class Onmyouji who had obtained the First-Class Onmyou qualifications according to Onmyou regulations, one of those who were named the Twelve Divine Generals. He was hailed as the rookie star of the Exorcist Bureau, the able Independent Exorcist, Kogure Zenjirou.

In addition, the man who had forcefully pulled out his chair, left his seat, and wordlessly walked towards the door with a cold expression as soon as Kogure walked into the office was a type completely contrasting with Kogure. His age was similar to Kogure's, but unlike the heroic, brilliant Kogure, he seemed much more aged. His rumpled suit was matched with a rumpled tie, and he wore a pair of old-

looking glasses. The most notable thing was the short cane he had in his right hand and the wooden fake leg that showed outside his pants.

He was Harutora and the others' homeroom teacher, Ohtomo Jin.

The teachers talked in a chatter, and Kogure seemed not to notice the gazes focusing on him, loudly chasing Ohtomo. Ohtomo's back showed impatience as he irritably left the office.

"Jin, hey, wait a moment!"

"....."

"What is it, don't walk so fast!"

"......Ahh, shut up, can't you quiet down a little?"

After walking into the corridor, Ohtomo frowned, irritably saying a few words to Kogure who had followed behind him. He moved through the corridor with a clunking sound of footsteps, walking near the stairs. After checking that there was no one around, he finally sighed heavily. He turned his angry gaze behind his shoulder.

"......You really can't learn to read the atmosphere."

"Me? Did I do something wrong?"

"No, whatever, it's not important. Anyway, it's too late to say this now, so goodbye."

"Hey hey hey, you're leaving right after we met? Think about how long we haven't seen each other for."

"We saw each other just last month."

"Huh? Ah, come to think of it, we did see each other last month."

"Alright, goodbye."

"No no no, don't be that heartless."

Kogure forced a smile and didn't let him go. Ohtomo looked up and sighed, then turned towards his old friend, his back leaning on the corridor wall.

The inconspicuous Onmyou Academy teacher and the Onmyou Agency's proud Divine General. They seemed like an unexpected match with each other, but the two of them had actually known each other for a very long time. Ohtomo and Kogure had both been in the Onmyou Academy - in the thirty-sixth class. And in addition to the Onmyou Academy, they had later entered the Onmyou Agency at the same time.

But, there were few people who knew that Ohtomo and Kogure were both National First-Class Onmyouji. When Ohtomo held a post at the Onmyou Agency, he had belonged to the Magic Crime Investigation Department and had a position requiring him to hide his Divine General identity as he worked in the underground magic community.

Though Ohtomo and Kogure had walked the same path, the present positions of the two were worlds apart.

The current Ohtomo was just a plain academy instructor, and his previous experience was just an ordinary Mystical Investigator. Inside the academy, only Principal Kurahashi knew his true past, and hence if many people learned that he was so close to a Divine General, the explanation afterwards would just be inviting trouble.....

Unfortunately, Kogure's thinking hadn't been so thorough, and he wasn't concerned at all about those small details.

"I really can't stand you." Ohtomo lifted an eyebrow, staring at Kogure. "I heard that the Exorcist Bureau was worked to death right now, how do you still have time to make trouble here?"

"What making trouble, I came here for my work..... Though formally it counts as paid leave....."

"Oho, a highly-paid elite taking paid leave, gracefully returning to his alma mater to visit, how enviable."

"What are you joking about, I'm busy to death right now. I don't have any time to rest at all, I'm even working overtime every day. I have to return to the bureau in a while and make a report to the higher-ups."

"I see, then you'd better--"

"Stop trying to get rid of me."

Upon seeing Kogure frown in annoyance, Ohtomo couldn't help but harrumph with a wry smile.

Actually, the Exorcist Bureau had been too busy for anything else recently. In the incident last month, a group of criminals had disturbed the spirit flow inside the city, performing spiritual disaster terrorist attacks. This led to the city's spirit flow becoming disordered after the incident ended, with frequent spiritual disasters.

The Onmyou Agency Exorcist Bureau - especially the exorcists who purified spiritual disasters on the frontline - was limited to only the exceptionally outstanding professional Onmyouji. The people who could become professional Onmyouji were extremely limited in the first place, and right now most of them were working

overtime. Hence, the work of the Independent Exorcists - the National First-Class Onmyouji who could do the work of many - had greatly increased.

"Right now I'm really worked to death, and I finally managed to get some precious break time, so why are you--!"

"Okay okay, you're so annoying, I understand. It's my blessing to be able to spend an Independent Officer's precious break time with him, so relax. Anyway, you managed to finally escape from your duty of watching that child."

"Huh? So you knew?"

"I pretty much knew. Though we have a meager 'guarantee', we can't let her do what she wants on the very first day, so you came to supervise her, right?"

"......Yeah, it's pretty much like that." Kogure scratched his face, replying hesitantly.

Actually, Kogure had visited the Onmyou Academy today mainly to 'watch over Suzuka'.

Dairenji Suzuka was a National First-Class Onmyouji, the youngest to pass the First-Class Onmyou exam, an elite among elites. Because her age and outer appearance were unique, the media often called her the 'Child Prodigy', holding special reports. Of course, this was a result of her power being universally recognized, but on the other hand the Onmyou Agency also had ideas on using her existence and improving the Onmyou Agency's image, which had even been criticized for being closed and exclusive.

However, last summer, she had brought about a huge incident. She had researched the soul magic that had been designated as forbidden magic, trying to perform the magical rite called the Taizan Fukun Ritual, the forbidden magic that had led to the spiritual disasters plaguing Tokyo.

Fortunately, the Taizan Fukun Ritual hadn't been truly performed and it had been forcefully terminated in the middle. But before Suzuka performed the rite, she beat back the groups of Mystical Investigators who had been chasing her, once even in a public place like a fireworks festival. In addition, it was also noticed during investigation that she had researched the magic designated as forbidden in private and had even entered the experimental stage.

The outside world saw magic like smoke and mirrors, and hence the criticism that came from society was extremely intense. A professional Onmyouji belonging to the Onmyou Agency and an underage youth - and the youth was even an elite Onmyouji - had stirred up trouble. Once such an incident was made public, they might not be able to avoid tarnishing of the entire industry's image.

The Onmyou Agency's higher-ups decided to take desperate measures, not revealing her name on the grounds that she was a minor and letting the incident cool down like that. Even if there were ultimately investigators who came from various directions on their own, they were all dealt with in private, so the truth was hidden.

"......Chief Amami had it pretty hard back then, complaining all day long."

"That's his job, you don't need to worry about him. Also, if the Mystical Investigators could have arrested her sooner, things wouldn't have become that serious. The chief can't whine about having to step forward to pick up the pieces."

That way of dealing with things - even for the Onmyou Agency - had succeeded, and in less than a month's time, the incident had already been completely forgotten. But, Suzuka obviously still had to undergo the Onmyou Agency's punishment, and as for how the Onmyou Agency punished her, it was by making Suzuka into a special student from this day on and having her enter the Onmyou Academy to study.

"Suspending her First-Class Onmyou qualification indefinitely and confinement for half a year, then after that period ended she had to transfer into the Onmyou

Academy to receive moral education." Kogure shrugged. "The higher-ups seem to believe that the lack of a common sense that comes from her family environment was the main reason Dairenji went out of control. But she certainly hasn't received any normal compulsory education."

"......You see those kinds of people pretty often in this industry."

"The current person is very peculiar. I agree with their judgment, though maybe it was a bit lenient - in the end, Dairenji's involvement with the incident wasn't made public, so punishing her too severely might bring about unnecessary speculation."

"......I see."

Ohtomo listened to Kogure's remark with a cold smile. His cold and somewhat amused voice didn't sound like he was praising his old classmate's opinion.

The two of them were classmates at the Onmyou Academy, but compared to Kogure who was active 'in the light', Ohtomo was active 'in the darkness'. He hadn't had a good impression of the higher-ups since he had taken his position in the Onmyou Agency.

Kogure was unconcerned, continuing to speak.

"But if we let her enter a normal school to study right now, it'll just create a heap of trouble, and moreover if we need to supervise her..... It's more suitable to have her reeducation in the Onmyou Academy where once something happens, it can be resolved on the 'inside'. More importantly, if something truly does happen, you're here to help deal with it."

Kogure's optimistic speaking made Ohtomo unable to help but sigh.

"......That's true, there's the principal as well as me here. But, didn't you forget an important person?"

"Huh, who do you mean? Are there other people here being instructors?"

"Not an instructor, I mean a student."

"Oh, you mean Tsuchimikado." Kogure laughed deviously as if he had suddenly thought of something. "The opening ceremony just now was really eye-opening. That Harutora was the student who defeated the Nue with Natsume in the incident last month, right? I haven't spoken with him yet, I heard he's the son of a branch family?"

"It's nothing to laugh about, didn't you also hear that those two were the ones who stopped the 'Child Prodigy' from holding the Taizan Fukun ritual? In other words, there's a deep connection between them."

"Seems like it, but I'm not too clear on the details."

"Moreover, the 'Child Prodigy' specializes in researching Imperial-style magic, so simply put, she's a specialist in Tsuchimikado Yakou research. The higher-ups know this, but to think they still deliberately--"

"Careful not to say too much, Jin. The 'rumor' regarding Natsume-kun hasn't been proved, after all."

"Never mind whether it's a rumor or not, it already wields power of influence. Even 'D' came out to nose around, so if this increases the Onmyou Academy's troubles....."

"With such a passionate confession, she can definitely get along well with them."

"Don't hear a deliberate provocation as a confession. They definitely won't get along."

Contrasting with Kogure who leisurely watched the liveliness, Ohtomo's face was dark. Though he had come to supervise Suzuka, Kogure only had to bear his burden for the day of her entrance, and that was why he could calmly have fun with the situation before him. However, Kogure could relax not just because he could drop the task after today.

"You don't have to worry, even if Dairenji deliberately makes trouble, there's still a trustworthy homeroom teacher by the two Tsuchimikado students." Upon saying this, Kogure grinned, teasing the teacher of this Onmyou Academy. Ohtomo frowned irritably, looking angrily at his old classmate.

"The 'Child Prodigy' against the 'Shadow', that's quite an unusual combination among the Twelve Divine Generals."

"Unfortunately....." Ohtomo spoke quietly, his tone cold. "Suzuka-kun is also a student in the Onmyou Academy from today onwards. I don't care what kind of plans the Onmyou Agency has, she has still entered the Onmyou Academy, and the academy will be responsible for taking care of her."

Kogure understood the meaning of Ohtomo's 'declaration', inadvertently changing his expression and looking at his old friend again. Then, he made a '...Ha' sound, laughing like an unguarded boy.

".....What's this, you look really cool, sensei."

"This is work." Upon saying this, Ohtomo turned away, looking down the empty corridor. Kogure also followed his gaze along the corridor, his face nostalgic.

"The academy building has changed..... But to the people who live in this world, the Onmyou Academy is still a special place no matter how it changes. They should also be able to get some valuable experience."

"....."

Ohtomo narrowed the eyes behind his glasses upon hearing Kogure talk about old times.

The current academy building was a new building opened last year, and the academy building the two of them had used when they were students had long since been demolished. However, just as Kogure said, the Onmyou Academy, as the school for

Onmyouji, was different from other teaching institutions, and a mysterious sense of belonging and associativity formed between the students. Moreover, the feeling was the same whether for chicks in the nest or independent Onmyouji who had already left the nest.

The profession of Onmyouji was highly visible, but the job contents were little known. Since it was hard for the general populace to understand, they often got strange stares from the outside world. Because of this, the industry was tightly knit and Onmyouji had exceptionally close relationships with each other. Moreover, such relationships formed naturally regardless of the benefits. To the vast majority of Onmyouji, the Onmyou Academy was the place where they had all spent their youth together and could be called their first 'home' in the world.

Ohtomo and Kogure weren't excluded.

However--

"......Come to think of it, that person's currently....."

"Zenjirou." Ohtomo muttered quietly. His voice wasn't sharp, but rather seemed calm or even tender, but when Kogure heard that remark, his body trembled in shock. He scratched his head awkwardly, not saying sorry or any words of apology.

"Anyways, if there are people making trouble in the Onmyou Academy, the principal and I will think of a way to resolve it, so don't worry..... Right, have you and the principal met?" Ohtomo spoke casually.

"I went to look for the principal once I got here, but....." Kogure's face suddenly went serious, quickly sweeping a keen gaze around, then lowering his voice. "......I don't know if I was overthinking it, but Alpha and Omega's auras seem like they've become quite a bit weaker. Is the principal's physical condition alright?"

Alpha and Omega were the komainu guarding the main entrance to the academy building. They were different from normal komainu, as they were the personal servants of Principal Kurahashi, belonging to the type of shikigami named mechanical-types. They were guard dogs that had accompanied the Onmyou Academy through history.

"......What, those words finally sound like an exorcist's." After Kogure said this, Ohtomo inadvertently showed bitterness, also lowering his voice to speak.

"Hey, Jin, does that mean--"

"Calm down, the principal's still healthy, she won't suddenly collapse, but....."

"B, But?"

"That old granny's been around for a long time, and she seems to know herself that her physical condition is getting worse every day."

"....."

Kogure was speechless for a while upon hearing Ohtomo's explanation. Ohtomo smiled wryly when he saw that complex expression. He changed his grip on his cane, using the end to tap Kogure's chest.

"What's wrong, Zenjirou, don't make that kind of depressed expression, especially since Onmyouji can't just write their mood on their face whenever."

"Sh, Shut up. Exorcists who deal with spiritual disasters don't need all that."

"That's true, and anyway you only need to worry about what kind of actions Suzuka-san will take in the future. In my opinion, she's definitely not going to be very law-abiding."

"You're responsible for resolving any troubles stirred up in the academy, right?"

"That's just on the surface. As for Suzuka-san's future, she'll just have to look to her own fortune."

Ohtomo remarked, moving from the wall. "Though I shouldn't say this about my own students, the two Tsuchimikados are very interesting, and will Suzuka-san have animosity towards them until the very end, or..... In any case, things aren't at the point where we have to intervene. Watching for changes from the side is the mature response." He used his cane to tap his own shoulder as he spoke.

Part 2

"What happened in the morning! What exactly is going on! Hurry up and explain clearly, Harutora!"

In the classroom during lunchtime.

The Onmyou Academy didn't change up classes when the first-years advanced into second-years, and hence even if they had changed their classroom, the students in the class were still familiar faces, and they spoke with no apprehension at all about the other party's feelings.

From the morning up until when class ended, Harutora had either cleverly shifted the topic or directly escaped from the classroom, successfully avoiding disaster. Unfortunately, when the bell for lunchtime rang, he wasn't in time to escape the classroom before his classmates blocked his path. That scene was like a celebrity whose scandal had been exposed being chased by reporters, but that actually wasn't so far from the situation, it was just that the celebrity wasn't Harutora, but rather the 'other party'.

"To think you stole the 'Child Prodigy' Dairenji Suzuka's first kiss! I remember that you studied at an ordinary high school near your home before you entered the Onmyou Academy, right? Exactly where and why did that kind of thing happen!"

"C, Calm down a bit, Kyouko! Things..... Things aren't like that!"

"What are you joking about! I couldn't even concentrate on the lecture this morning because of this matter! Never mind if it were Natsume, the next heir of the Tsuchimikado family - Ah, no, fortunately it wasn't Natsume-san - But why exactly would you do such a thing?"

"Yeah! Hurry up and answer, Harutora!"

"It's really complicated.....!"

"Hurry up and say it clearly, Tsucchi!"

The classmates' eyes gleamed sharply as they questioned Harutora. The foremost among them was his friend Kurahashi Kyouko. Her beautiful appearance was no worse than a young female idol's, and she was the oldest daughter of the famous Kurahashi family - the granddaughter of Principal Kurahashi who had just spoken a greeting on the podium.

Kyouko seized Harutora's chest, short of breath.

"Listen up, Harutora, the 'Child Prodigy' Dairenji Suzuka is an extraordinarily famous Onmyouji that even ordinary people know - the Onmyou Agency made her into a spokesperson, you could say that she's an industry idol!"

"......I, It seems like that way......."

"And she isn't just an idol with a cute outer appearance. She's the youngest person in history with First-Class Onmyou qualifications, a true National First-Class Onmyouji! She's the object that the Onmyou Academy students all look up to! She's a star!"

"......I, I see....."

"Why is such an incredible person k-k-kissing a student like you whose lineage barely passes and whose grades are terrible! Isn't that too strange? That's really incomprehensible! What kind of relationship do you have?"

Kyouko raved excitedly, swinging around her head of tied-up brown hair as her questioning gradually became sharper.

Most of the students in the class weren't particularly mad, they were just purely driven by curiosity.

The class all recognized the after-school tutoring regular whose grades were behind, and no one in the Onmyou Academy didn't know the famous Twelve Divine

Generals. That kind of combination wasn't just strange, it was so shocking that it wouldn't be strange for one's eyeballs to pop out. Even his usually mild-mannered friend inevitably had a similar reaction.

"You're acting too unfamiliar, Harutora-kun! Since she spoke so energetically, you should just truthfully announce whatever's between you two." Momoe Tenma opened his mouth to speak from next to Kyouko. He had a doll-like face, and his small external appearance looked gentle. The eyes underneath his glasses gleamed as he naively asked Harutora.

Though Kyouko was tough, it wasn't easy to deal with Tenma who brought up the question so matter-of-factly, especially because the person who wanted to figure out Suzuka's true intentions was none other than Harutora.

"Alright, hurry up and answer! Could it be that you can't answer? What kind of unspeakable things did you do?"

"Just say it, Harutora-kun. What kind of relationship do you two have? Could you be boyfriend and girlfriend?"

"Yeah! Hurry up and say it clearly, Harutora!"

"Did you really only kiss? Or....."

"You'd better say it now!"

"H, Hold on, you guys.....!"

The class's mood gradually swelled with Harutora as the center, making the expressions of the people questioning Harutora become rigid, with nothing he could do about it.

...I, I'm.....done for.

If the positions were reversed, he would most likely also try questioning to get to the bottom of things. However, as for Suzuka and the incident that happened last summer, the Mystical Investigators who had been responsible for dealing with the aftermath were under strict gag orders, and if he explained his experience meeting Suzuka, he was inevitably bound to mention that incident.

Just as he was in distress...

"......Stop right there!"

A young girl's angry voice suddenly sounded, and a fist-sized ball of flame appeared above Harutora and the others' heads.

The ball of fire whirled, sparks flying. Kyouko, Tenma, and the other students hastily moved back from Harutora, and a small girl wearing imperial clothing and a hakama immediately appeared.

The girl looked to be in first or second grade at the most, and her appearance was proper like a Japanese doll, but her eyes were bright blue, a pair of pointed ears grew on her head, and a leaf-shaped tail grew out behind her.

She was Harutora's servant shikigami - Kon.

"Impolite heathens! I dared not speak while silently staying by Harutora-sama's side as he ordered, but I did not expect you to be this rash. Back, back!"

In contrast with her outer appearance, her language was archaic and she brandished a wakizashi in her hand, her beloved blade Kachiwari. Kyouko, Tenma, and the others were familiar with Kon's temper, hurriedly keeping a distance from Kon.

"Wah, Kon! Calm down a bit."

"I-I-I-If I dare say, I am always deeply calm! Even among enemies, I will definitely not allow enemies to approach Harutora-sama by half a step.....!"

Her ears and tail shot up abruptly, a towering rage showing on her immature face as she intimidated the students.

Kon was a defensive shikigami. Basically, she was always on standby around Harutora, and she was normally always hiding herself, not taking form before others. Her outer appearance looked like a youthful little girl, but she wouldn't hesitate to brave fire and water or take heavy wounds if it was to protect her master. She was a somewhat insubordinate and easily excited shikigami.

However, the students in the class had already gotten used to Kon's overly faithful loyalty over half a year.

"Oh my, Kon-chan, we're actually admiring Harutora, we're not blaming him." Kyouko smiled reassuringly like she was placating a child.

"I won't be deceived, you showed killing intent!"

"Because we're very interested - Kon-chan, what about you? Don't you want to know?"

"O, Of course! I am responsible for protecting Harutora-sama--!"

"Then you should be even more interested, isn't the other party a Divine General? If you don't first figure out the relationship between them, how can you focus on guarding?"

"That.....!"

"Also, didn't she say she and Harutora kissed? Do you know what a kiss is? It means mouth to mouth, smooch.....!"

"Ki.....mou.....smooch!"

"That's right. Though you're a shikigami - No, because you're a shikigami, you should be even more interested! After all, this incident involves your important master, right, Kon-chan?"

"That.....!"

Kon's tail trembled, her ears squirming and turning in random directions. With Kyouko's every word, she seemed even more tense and anxious. Actually, this matter had long since troubled her even without Kyouko especially pointing it out.

She held Kachiwari in a backhand grip, still not releasing her attacking stance. But, "....." She looked back over her shoulder towards the master that she protected, her face flushed red and her blue eyes moist, as if tears would leak out at any time. Harutora couldn't help but sigh lightly.

"Ah, right. Touji-kun, did you know something had happened? Weren't you and Harutora in the same high school before transferring here? You should know a lot about him before he came to the Onmyou Academy, right?"

When Tenma asked that question, the students encircling Harutora - and Kon as well - immediately turned their attention towards Touji. Touji, who was watching from slightly farther away, smiled, his expression a bit surprised.

"That's true. What about it, Touji? Do you know something?"

Kyouko asked her heartfelt suspicion on behalf of the other students. Behind Kyouko and the others, Harutora desperately shook his head left and right. Touji leisurely shrugged his shoulders while enduring everyone's enthusiastic gazes.

"......Let me think. This is the first time I've heard about a kiss, but..." Ohhh, the students exploded into a clamor, and Harutora shook his head again for dear life. Touji looked at the audience, grinning. "If it's true, it probably happened on 'that festival evening' .....So that's what it was, that's why the next day he and Hokuto....."

He spoke quieter and quieter, and the last part of it was almost inaudible, but the first half of his words already held sufficient destructive power. In particular, once they heard the meaningful keyword 'that festival evening', almost all of the girls in the class made enthusiastic cheers, but Harutora screamed on the inside.

"Tenma was right, you're acting too unfamiliar, Harutora. With our relationship, is there any need to hide that kind of thing?"

"Sh, Shut up, Touji! Right now isn't the time to make that sort of joke!"

"Nonsense! Is there anything more important right now?"

"Don't take this opportunity to make a fuss, Kyouko! Anyway, it's a long story!"

"Hearing you say it's a long story..... Harutora-kun, could it be that you don't have any interest in Dairenji-san, yet you stole her first kiss?"

"I didn't! That's not true! Don't say things that are so easily misunderstood, Tenma!"

"....."

"To think even Kon is like this! Please, don't look at me with a tearful face!"

Harutora desperately denied it, but the excited emotions of the people around him wouldn't let up. As Kon gradually slackened her attacking stance, the students approached Harutora again. Just then, a pounding sound rang out and the classroom momentarily fell silent. After a second, the students turned around in confusion, looking one by one at the source of the noise, only then noticing that Natsume had been the one who made the sound. She was standing up from her seat, keeping the posture with which she had forcefully smashed her textbook onto the table, her head slightly lowered and not moving a muscle. Her bangs covered the expression on her face, but even without seeing it clearly, the students still instinctively held their breath.

"......N, Natsume.....?" Harutora probed quietly.

"......Sorry." After saying this, Natsume slowly raised her lowered head, the narrow eyes under her bangs shooting out a gaze that definitely wouldn't easily let her target go. Harutora, Kyouko, Tenma, and even Kon didn't dare speak, and Touji was the only one in the classroom who grinned. It was really hard to tell whether one should praise him or say that this was a bad habit of his.

"I need Harutora for something. Sorry, could you wait until later to speak with him?" Natsume continued to say.

It looked like there wouldn't be time to eat lunch. Harutora prepared himself, following behind the silent Natsume.

...I wouldn't have appetite anyway.....

Maybe noticing the tense atmosphere between the two, Kon had already dematerialized, hiding her whereabouts even though she was still with him. Right now, Harutora wanted her to stay with him, but he didn't have the courage to order her to appear in front of Natsume.

Among the students who walked through the corridor, there were several who noticed Harutora. They had a hard time concealing their shocked expressions, perhaps remembering the scene from the opening ceremony. In the end, having the entire student body of the Onmyou Academy all gathered in the same place and having all their curiosity-filled gazes focused on him made Harutora want to dig a hole in the ground to escape. Things would truly be troublesome.

...Damn, that bastard.....

In any case, the current priority was explaining clearly to Natsume. Harutora gritted his teeth, gazing at the back of his childhood friend who hadn't opened her mouth to say a single word after walking out of the classroom.

Natsume brought Harutora to the emergency stairwell near the outer wall of the academy. Harutora and the others would always come here when they spoke privately.

How should he explain this. Harutora had been troubled the whole way, and once they went through the door to the emergency stairwell, his mouth moved of his own accord, and he spoke more and more anxiously. "Natsume, listen to me. That's not the truth..... No, that person and I truly - Dairenji Suzuka and I truly did kiss in the

incident last summer..... But, it wasn't truly like that." His cheeks burned, his manner strange, unable to control himself.

"Natsume, y-you also remember, right? Wasn't that person's shikigami in my stomach back then? She kissed me to set a trap..... A, Also, the situation of the kiss was completely different from what those guys in class imagine. I was being held by that person's shikigami, I couldn't move at all, and that girl was incredibly mad..... Because my lie that I was Natsume got exposed..... A, Also, do you remember the shikigami Hokuto I mentioned before? She was right there, and Suzuka ended up mistaking Hokuto as my girlfriend and deliberately messed with us to retaliate for me tricking her, so in front of Hokuto, she deliberately....."

Natsume walked into the stairwell, still not turning back to look at Harutora.

Harutora desperately explained the situation back then, but he couldn't explain it clearly no matter what he said. Conversely, his emotions got more and more fretful and he couldn't help but think of escaping.

"A, Anyway, we did kiss, but it's not like that at all. Of course, neither that person nor I have any interest..... We even became enemies because of that incident..... She definitely said that just now to deliberately trouble me, it's really stupid. What kind of person is that, does she even have a heart? Right?"

Harutora was even adding gestures to his explanation before he noticed. He even felt unable to understand why he was this agitated.

...What's wrong with me, why am I explaining so anxiously.....

One reason was definitely because he feared Natsume getting angry, but it seemed that this wasn't it, his feelings of wanting to resolve this misunderstanding were so intense that he was unable to keep calm.

Then, "......You don't need to say any more." Natsume finally opened her mouth, her voice sounding like she was forcefully holding back her agitated emotions. Upon hearing her speak like this, Harutora conversely became more fretful.

"Please listen to my explanation, I really--"

"Didn't I say you didn't need to keep talking!"

Natsume shouted again with a different tone from when she normally acted as a male, letting out her 'original' voice - a girl's clear and high-pitched voice. She cried out with a trembling body.

"I already knew those things, you don't have to explain things one by one, I understand them!"

"What?"

"E, Even if I understand..... I can't help it!"

Natsume's face reddened as she spoke, her expression complex. It didn't really seem like her cheeks were flushed from anger, and he couldn't tell whether it was anger, sadness, or regret. Even if he didn't listen to Natsume's voice or words, the current her didn't look like a male student.

Natsume's reaction stunned Harutora for a while.

"C, Can't help it..... What does that mean?"

"Well - None of your business!"

"How can you say that..... But Natsume, you really know what happened?"

"Of course! How many times are you going to ask?"

"W, Why? Did I mention that incident before?"

He couldn't help but raise the question. Natsume was visibly confused once she heard this, not knowing what to do.

"D, Didn't you just explain it! I understood what happened after hearing your explanation."

"Huh? But you said 'you don't need to explain things one by one'....."

"What are you saying? That kind of trivial detail isn't important at all! Wh, When the shikigami inside you charged out, I pretty much knew what was going on!"

Harutora didn't get why Natsume was so flustered and angry. Thinking carefully, the shikigami planted in his body might have been related with the kiss, though such speculation was rather far-fetched. However, right now he didn't have the energy or courage to dispute. Anyway, since the message that the kiss with Suzuka was different from a normal kiss had been conveyed, it would just be looking for trouble to enrage her further.

...Great.....probably.

Harutora convinced himself.

"I, It's good that you understand. Th, Thanks."

".....You don't need to thank me for this kind of thing."

"Y, You're right, but still thanks"

"....."

Natsume glared at Harutora with reddened eyes, and after a while, ".....Bakatora." She murmured lightly, sighing deeply. Though that reaction was hard to understand, at the least it looked like she had calmed down a bit.

"Anyway.....never mind k, ki.....never mind that kind of thing for now, there's a serious problem at the moment."

"Wh, What problem?"

Natsume's tone was solemn, and Harutora's heart jumped again.

"......Did you forget? Last summer, she and I met directly and she saw me." Natsume continued speaking.

"Of course I remember, how could I forget it, but that's--"

"How was I dressed back then, do you still remember?"

Natsume stared intently at Harutora. Harutora was confused and tried to recall the situation from back then again.

In the stormy night last summer, Harutora had become Natsume's shikigami in the main family household in order to stop Suzuka from holding the Taizan Fukun Ritual. The two of them had headed to the Imperial Hill and had confronted Suzuka who had been preparing to hold the rite at the altar on the peak of the Imperial Hill.

At that time, the rain had stopped, the moon was hazy, and the two of them had ridden the horse-shaped shikigami Yukikaze that served the Tsuchimikado family. Harutora had a bamboo trunk on his back, and Natsume was responsible of holding Yukikaze's reins, glowing heroically--

"......Ah."

Harutora finally noticed the problem and suddenly went speechless. Natsume nodded her head.

"......You finally noticed it, I was..... wearing miko clothing at the time. When I was riding on Yukikaze's back..... I talked with her from the horse, and it's very possible that she saw me clearly, saw me dressed as a miko, and knows that I'm actually a girl."

Harutora's face paled. Natsume was right, Suzuka had indeed seen Natsume dressed as a miko appear before her. That meant that she knew that Natsume, who was dressed as a male and interacted with the outside world as a male due to family tradition, was actually a girl.

But... "H, Hold on! Suzuka didn't know what Tsuchimikado Natsume looked like back then, so that's why she mistook me as Natsume. Also..... I don't remember very clearly, but when she saw you dressed as a miko, she might not have realized that you were Natsume."

"Back then, she certainly said to me: 'are you also a Tsuchimikado', so in other words, after she saw me, she still didn't notice that I was Tsuchimikado Natsume. She definitely judged that Tsuchimikado Natsume is a male from her investigation beforehand, but....." Natsume's voice sank. "She saw my face."

Harutora couldn't say anything else.

Right, even if she didn't know the other party's identity, Suzuka had indeed seen the appearance of the 'girl dressed as a miko', and if she saw Natsume right now, maybe she would see that 'Tsuchimikado Natsume' and the 'girl dressed as a miko' looked exactly the same.

Harutora's heart leaped as he panicked.

"Oh no! In the entrance ceremony just now--"

"Don't worry, I quickly used stealth magic to hide my presence when she noticed you. Our gazes didn't cross either, so it's reasonably certain that she didn't notice me, so at least she doesn't know yet."

"B, But....."

".....Right, the problem is what to do now....."

Natsume spoke vaguely, lightly chewing her lip. Harutora didn't know what to say for a while.

Though she wasn't as famous as Suzuka, Natsume was a celebrity in the Onmyou Academy. Natsume was the Tsuchimikado family's next heir, had a reputation for being a genius, and was very famous. No one in the academy didn't know her, and she could be called a focus of attention.

In particular, the 'Child Prodigy' Dairenji Suzuka was a specialist in researching magic related to Yakou and believed that Natsume was Yakou's reincarnation. Moreover, she had tried to approach Natsume in order to hold the Taizan Fukun Ritual, so she should have been quite interested in the existence of 'Tsuchimikado Natsume' since the beginning.

Now, since Suzuka had transferred into the Onmyou Academy, she had to feel interested in Natsume. In the near future, she would definitely want to try to come in contact with her.

If Suzuka saw Natsume's appearance, how would the situation change?

The chance that Natsume was exposed as a girl pretending to be male was quite high, and even if that didn't happen, it was very difficult to say that Natsume's male disguise was successful.

...What should we do.....

Harutora worried silently and Natsume did the same. The two of them didn't say a word, looking at each other, but neither of their faces held the answer. They could only hear the faint sounds of the lunchtime clamor from inside the academy.

Part 3

In the end, they didn't come to a conclusion. Just like that, the first day of the new term reached the time when school let out.

Maybe because Natsume's words and actions during lunchtime were still vivid, Kyouko, Tenma and the other students didn't crowd around Harutora again, only daring to watch from afar. Hence, the interior of the classroom was full of an unusual tension and a silent atmosphere.

But there was an exception, and it was Touji.

".....What was up with 'that incident' in the morning? Are you going to fight with that brat again?" Touji sat in a seat adjacent to Harutora and Natsume who were also attending class next to each other, asking in a quiet whisper that the surrounding people couldn't hear.

Even if the opponent was one of the Twelve Divine Generals, he could still calmly use a description like 'fight', as expected of something Touji would say. He normally didn't hesitate to ask for trouble, and it seemed that he was even more elated than usual.

Natsume sat in her seat, looking up at Touji and quietly replying: ".....I'm not sure." The guy who always loved making trouble couldn't help but frown slightly. He seemed to be concerned more about Natsume's look and attitude than this response.

"What's wrong, is the situation that serious? I mostly heard about the incident last summer..... Is there some deep animosity between you?" Touji raised the question straightforwardly while keeping an eye out for surrounding gazes.

Natsume's face looked confused, and she turned her vision towards Harutora in the next seat, not knowing how to respond. ".....Natsume, could you explain to Touji." But once Harutora said this, he suddenly stood up from his seat.

"What?"

"...Harutora?"

Natsume and Touji were shocked for a moment. "......I'm going to go meet her." Harutora looked at the two of them in turn, using a voice that only the two of them heard. However, he left the two of them, rushing out of the classroom door. "H, Harutora!" Natsume hurriedly called out in surprise, but he didn't turn back, thinking that he was unable to bring Natsume along with him since she couldn't show herself.

Leaving behind the classroom that became noisy again, Harutora ran out through the door and into the corridor, sprinting to the first-year classroom.

...If this went on, there would be no end to it.

He hadn't discussed ways to resolve this with Natsume during lunchtime, but actually it was natural. Suzuka herself was the most knowledgeable about what kind of action she would take next. In that case, the fastest way to resolve things was to meet with her directly and understand her intentions face-to-face.

The explosive remark at the entrance ceremony was definitely a deliberate action, and, after all, he had stopped her plans last year, so she definitely had a grudge against him.

...Better to die than live in dishonor..... Though it would be best to avoid that kind of ending as much as possible.....

Anyway, it would definitely be harmless to meet with her first and understand what Suzuka was planning. The current her was different from her last summer - who had used forbidden magic to try resurrecting her brother from death and had fallen into a crazed state. She shouldn't be the same person anymore. Touji's worry that she still held animosity had a very high chance of being true, but continuing to procrastinate like this wouldn't resolve the problem.

One by one, Harutora avoided the students who were returning home after school, hurriedly heading to the first-year classroom. However - "What? She went back? When?" After arriving in the first-year classroom, Harutora asked the two female students who walked by the door - the new students wearing new uniforms - asking their help to call out Suzuka.

Unfortunately, Suzuka wasn't in the classroom. According to the two female students' story, Suzuka had said goodbye to everyone after school and left the classroom early.

"She just left. Right, she might just be leaving the classroom, she might not have gone home."

"But someone came to get her, right? She should be looking for that person."

"Do you know where that person who came to get her is?"

"I don't know."

"I'm not sure either....."

Damn. Harutora scratched his head. He had rushed out of the classroom so courageously, but maybe he had ended up running for nothing. He knew that he should have rushed over here directly during the lunchtime.

On the other hand, the two new students remembered the sudden situation during the entrance ceremony and seemed to also remember the appearance of Harutora who had been involved. They answered Harutora's questions with goodwill, and simultaneously elbowed each other a few times.

Once Harutora stopped asking--

"Um.....Senpai? Is what Dairenji-san said during the entrance ceremony true?"

"Senpai, are you Dairenji-san's ex-boyfriend? Or are you actually her current boyfriend?"

Their faces shone with curiosity, leaning towards Harutora excitedly. A few unfamiliar new students passed by, every one of them perking their ears up to eavesdrop.

The unfamiliar title 'senpai' made Harutora's ears itch. Though it sounded nice to have newly entered female students speaking so intimately with him, he really couldn't feel happy in this kind of situation.

"It's not like that, that girl was just troubling me."

"But didn't you come to find her?"

"Moreover, you referred to a Divine General as 'that girl'. You really don't have an ordinary relationship."

"It's not like that! We just..... know each other."

"Ah, you hesitated just now."

"Kyaah!"

What are you squealing for... Harutora almost shouted a reproach, but he forced himself to endure it. Anyway, it was a waste of breath to continue saying something now, Harutora thought. Just as he was planning on turning around and leaving--

--Right.

"Hey, let me ask, you're classmates with that girl - with Dairenji Suzuka, right? You were with her for the whole day today, right?"

"Right."

"Of course."

"Then how is that girl - how is she? How much did you talk with her?"

"How could we find her to talk. Even if she's a classmate, she's a Divine General, you know."

"When I greeted her, she replied with a really easygoing attitude, but if I continued talking I would be so tense I wouldn't know what to say."

The two of them shook their heads in unison. These two people weren't tense at all when facing their Onmyou Academy 'senpai', Harutora thought to himself, but he didn't say anything.

"Also, Dairenji-san leaves the classroom as soon as class ends and during lunchtime, slipping away to somewhere else."

"Right, there are people in the class who want to hear what exactly is going on about the entrance ceremony thing from her directly, but unfortunately they haven't been able to ask."

"......I see."

From her attitude at the entrance ceremony, he had originally thought she would act a bit friendlier to the classmates around her. Harutora had been worried about her spreading nonsense rumors, but after hearing them say this, it seemed that his worries had been unfounded.

...So the morning business was really just revenge?

The two new students still doggedly pursued Harutora, trying to figure out the truth. Harutora casually dodged their questions, quickly escaping the first-year classroom.

Harutora had immediately gone to the first-year classroom after school let out, and it seemed that Suzuka had left the classroom not long ago. If she was meeting with the person who came to get her, it was very possible that she was still in the academy building. Harutora decided to look around first, but the academy building was quite

vast, and it was quite difficult to find Suzuka with just one person. Even if he could ask Kon to help search, it was hard to say whether he could find her.

"It's very possible that I could stop her by Alpha and Omega, but..... everyone makes her out to be an idol, so maybe she'll leave from the back entrance."

Inquiring about Suzuka's whereabouts was probably the most accurate method, as even if that morning incident hadn't happened, there probably wasn't a single person who didn't know Suzuka. But if he truly did that, the rumors about Harutora himself would just get worse and worse. This commotion was already more than he expected, and it was hard to imagine what kind of rumors would spread if he asked everywhere for Suzuka's whereabouts. Maybe at some point he and Suzuka would already have become lifelong companions.

...Maybe I should just wait until tomorrow?

Harutora became more and more depressed as he thought, slumping his shoulders in a dark mood. But he still decided to try his luck and see whether he could find Suzuka. He didn't head to the entrance with the Komainu guards, but chose to wait by the academy back entrance instead. He chose the back entrance because there were more people by the main exit, and even if he succeeded in coming in contact with Suzuka, he wouldn't be able to escape the eyes of others. In order to avoid calling forth a greater misunderstanding, it was best to communicate directly with Suzuka while avoiding eyes and ears.

".....Uh, wait, since someone came to get her, I can't possibly talk to her alone, right?"

In the end, he had rushed out to find her impulsively, so he could only take things one step at a time. Harutora was at a loss again, and in the end could only walk in resignation towards the back entrance.

After school let out, almost all of the students would leave from the main entrance, and there weren't many people walking by the back entrance. Harutora unconsciously eased up. He had been the focus of strange looks since early on today, and he really couldn't stand it.

...Tch, how troublesome.

The joyous and anxious feeling of advancing to the second year had been gone a long time ago. Honestly, he had already cleanly forgotten about kissing Suzuka until today morning. The incident last summer had strongly influenced Harutora, and Suzuka kissing him was an insignificant sudden event compared to the other shocks he experienced during this incident. He had never even dreamed that that matter would actually bring him this much trouble.

Maybe this was magic Suzuka had cast - second-class magic.

"What's more, no one listened to my explanation at all..... The kiss back then was a completely different matter."

Taking advantage of the fact that no one was present, Harutora griped. But, Kon was beside him.

"......P, Pardon my intrusion..... May I ask whether things are truly as Harutora-sama says?" Kon spoke up to ask, her tone sounding a bit frightened yet unable to help but ask.

"......Kon." Harutora inadvertently held his head in bitterness. "Didn't you hear everything when I explained to Natsume? Everything I said is the completely authentic truth."

"H, However.....!" Maybe because she was unable to keep enduring it, Kon panicked, appearing in front of Harutora. Seriousness showed in her blue eyes and her pair of pointed ears trembled as if they were cold, her small hands clasped in

front of her chest. "With an Onmyouji whose name is reputed over the whole world, and who is still a young girl, you cannot just k-ki.....!"

"I said, Kon, I didn't kiss her, that girl took the opportunity while I couldn't move to kiss me. A traditional person like you wouldn't be able to understand, but to young people nowadays, kissing one or two times isn't anything huge."

"Th, The class was in no small uproar....."

"They just want to tease me! Suzuka definitely isn't hung up about this matter, I'd bet that she deliberately brought up that incident in the morning just to get revenge on me!"

Harutora could no longer take being doubted by his own shikigami, refuting her agitatedly. His demeanor made shock appear all over Kon's face, but his ideas seemed accurately conveyed. True confidence emerged on Kon's immature face and she nodded again and again.

"Th, Therefore..... Harutora-sama has no feelings for this person?"

"None! Not a bit, none at all, that's not even possible! I said several times, she and I are enemies. Though I don't hate her, there's nowhere for love."

".....Yes....."

Kon stared at Harutora for a good while, then finally released her tension, her expression seeming quite a bit relaxed. The ears on her head wiggled back and forth, and her tail wagged lightly in happiness.

"U, Understood..... I apologize for my transgression."

She apologized sincerely although her face was pleased, and Harutora inadvertently relaxed when he saw this. However, a moment later, Kon's ears leaped up, as if her perturbed attitude just now had been an illusion. She deftly drew out her sharp wakizashi, quickly circling behind Harutora's back.

Harutora's heart leaped. "What happened, Kon?" After he turned around, he noticed that Kon's back was to her master, guarding her master's back while gripping Kachiwari.

Kon grasped her wakizashi, and in front of her... appeared a figure.

Harutora was currently advancing through the corridor of the back entrance. Originally, there hadn't been anyone around anywhere, and someone had quietly approached from behind his back at some point.

A female student.

She had an unfamiliar face and short hair. Her body was smaller than Natsume's, and the sleeves of her uniform were overly long, seeming like they didn't really fit. Moreover, at first glance she looked like an ordinary female student, only noticing after a careful look that she was amazingly pretty. This could be attributed to her thin sense of presence. Even if she was right before him, he didn't feel the slightest bit of presence. It was as if he noticed right after turning around that there was a ghost standing behind his back, frightening Harutora stiff.

Her expression was indifferent, giving off a transparent sense of beauty.

Like a fuzzy image of a mirage.

Harutora couldn't help but stare.

After his starting shock disappeared, Harutora didn't feel any 'danger' or 'tension' from the female student's body, and he soon eased up.

He 'looked' carefully again, not noticing any abnormalities in aura. Kon still held her wakizashi threateningly, but she didn't get flustered. Maybe he hadn't been able to notice immediately because the other party had cast stealth magic, and from her thin feeling of presence, she hadn't completely removed her stealth.

Her indifferent expression looked simply like she was spacing out, and she currently looked like she was daydreaming as she stared blankly at Harutora.

"......Uh....."

...Who are you?

Harutora hadn't had time to ask when, "Little girl." The female student opened her mouth first, letting out a light voice.

"Huh?"

"A little girl."

"Little..... Oh, you mean Kon?"

"A little fox girl."

"....."

"A cute little fox girl."

"....."

She had said 'little girl' a few times consecutively right after opening her mouth, so it was no wonder Harutora would frown in confusion and incomprehension.

Kon quietly cast an inquisitive gaze towards Harutora, and Harutora nodded, so she returned Kachiwari to its sheath for now. Harutora put his hand on Kon's head, in case she suddenly lost control.

"Her name's Kon, my defensive shikigami. Could I ask--"

"A cute little fox girl shikigami."

"Uh, who exactly are--"

"In other words, you're Tsuchimikado Harutora."

Harutora's heart jumped. He hadn't expected the other person to suddenly say his own name.

"So you knew who I am? .....Right, it's definitely because of the incident in the morning....."

"What happened in the morning?"

"Huh? It's unrelated to that?"

In that case, she hadn't recognized Harutora because she had seen him, but instead because she had noticed Kon first. But to jump from 'little girl shikigami' to 'Tsuchimikado Harutora'... Though it matched reality, he really couldn't feel happy about that kind of association.

"I didn't attend the entrance ceremony." The female student spoke calmly.

"I see, then how do you know about Kon and I?"

"Were you confessed to by a little girl in the entrance ceremony?"

"Answer my question first! Also, no one confessed to me, and she's not a little girl!"

"....."

"What are you wondering about, I'm the one who doesn't understand!"

Were this year's new students all this strange? Not just Suzuka, but also the girl in front of him and the two female students he had met in the classroom. He couldn't help but wonder whether he could communicate normally with these new students. Though Kon had sheathed her wakizashi, her expression still looked like she was staring at a suspicious person, carefully watching her each and every move.

"Who exactly are you? What did you find me for?" Since the entire day had been troubles one after another, Harutora had difficulty concealing his impatience,

questioning this unknown female student. But even faced with Harutora's unfriendly gaze, the female student seemed unmoved, her expression still indifferent.

"I'm your senpai." She spoke with a flat tone.

"What? Y, You're a third year?"

Harutora was surprised again.

This was the floor that the first-year classroom was on, and her body was so small, hence Harutora had assumed that she was a new student. But, if she had truly cast stealth magic just now, then it was indeed more convincing to say she was a third-year student rather than a new student.

"Excuse me - No, I'm sorry, I thought you were a new student....."

"Because I'm very small."

"No, uh....."

"I'm like a little girl."

"That's not the reason!"

"It's alright, people always get it wrong."

"What are you currently saying is alright? Being mistaken for a new student, or little girls?"

"My outer appearance looks very young."

"Relax! At least you definitely don't look like a little girl!"

Natsume had mentioned that the third years could be called semi-professional Onmyouji, but though their skills were high, their personalities might be hard to stomach. His respect for his senpais instantly vanished and Harutora couldn't hold back his angry tone.

"Ahh, damn, whatever..... Anyway, uh you....."

"Senpai."

"Alright, Senpai, could I ask why you're looking for me? I have things to do." However annoying she was, Harutora would still try to stay polite.

"It's nothing, I just happened to meet you." The female student replied casually.

".....That answer's not outside my expectations."

"I couldn't control myself for a while because I noticed there was a little girl here."

"Could it be that you like little girls, senpai?"

"No." The female student replied with a flat tone. "Because I know the son of the Tsuchimikado branch family brings a shikigami like that around with him."

"Huh?"

That pair of daydreaming eyes seemed to truly focus for the first time since the female student had appeared. Though she had looked at him before, this was the first time her hazy demeanor had become truly clear.

Of course, this was just Harutora's own feeling, and it might possibly be a pure mistake.

"I've always wanted to meet the Tsuchimikado family member."

"Wh, Why....."

"Because I'm curious."

".....Then did you meet Natsume before?"

"I only saw the main family son from afar, and I would pass by your side occasionally."

"....."

After hearing the senpai's explanation, Harutora finally got a clue.

Once Suzuka had appeared, Harutora had completely forgotten that he and Natsume had originally been centers of attention in the Onmyou Academy, especially Natsume. She was the next heir of the famous Tsuchimikado family, with excellent grades and a beautiful appearance, and there were even outside rumors that she was the reincarnation of Tsuchimikado Yakou.

Maybe the newly entered students still didn't know much, but the current third-years were probably extremely interested in the 'two Tsuchimikado kouhai'. In that case, it was understandable that she would want to greet him if they bumped into each other.

"But..."

"B, But?"

"I don't hate little girls either..."

"Senpai, I have no interest at all in your private affairs." Harutora muttered a complaint, interrupting her words, unable to help but think that this was really an exhausting senpai. "But whatever, you know what kind of a person I am now, right senpai? Are you satisfied?"

"Let me think about it." Saying this, the female student walked near Harutora. Kon rapidly took a stance once she saw that, but Harutora used his hand to stop her.

The female student walked in front of Harutora, looking up at him. That kind of action made her look even smaller, and she was probably not much different from Suzuka, and maybe she was even shorter. Then, the female student quickly raised her hand, reaching out a finger from her long sleeve, pointing at Harutora's face - more accurately, she pointed at the pentagram mark under his left eye.

"What's that?"

"Huh? .....Oh, you mean this tattoo-like thing? Long story short, it's basically a magic--"

"It looks weird on your face."

"You don't have to care!"

With every word, Harutora felt that he was becoming more and more tired. But, the female student seemed like she was already satisfied, and though her expression didn't change, her shoulders twitched up and down. Maybe she was laughing.

"I'm going." After quietly saying goodbye, she neatly turned her back towards Harutora, striding away without turning around to look at Harutora, who stood still, or stopping her footsteps. "Bye." She passed through the corridor, vanishing around the corner.

Harutora, who had been tossed aside, felt agitated, with nowhere to vent it. ".....What the hell is that girl doing?" He muttered in exhaustion.

After entering the Onmyou Academy, Harutora had already felt stunned that the principal, teachers, and students here were all strange. He once again thought of how he didn't actually have many opportunities to speak with his senpai. Half a year had passed after he entered, but there were still things here that stunned him. The Onmyou Academy really was an unfathomable world.

".....Ah..... Kon, why don't you hide for now?"

"Y, Yes, a-as you command!"

His shikigami's frank response touched Harutora's heart even more right now.

...This girl is soothing.

Harutora thought gratefully.

Just then, "Huh? Isn't that Harutora-kun? What are you doing here?" A leisurely call sounded from behind Harutora's back and he hurriedly turned around.

"Ohtomo-sensei."

Greeting him was homeroom teacher Ohtomo - who had continued being their class's homeroom teacher after they advanced to the second year. His left hand was in his pants pocket and his right hand held a cane. He was smiling at Harutora as he advanced on his fake leg. However, Harutora's gaze instead passed by Ohtomo, falling on the two people behind his back. "Ah." He couldn't help but exclaim quietly, and one of the two people standing in front of him - the man wearing an aviator jacket and jeans - seemed a bit surprised when he saw Harutora. "Yo." He greeted him cheerfully.

"It's been a while, do you still remember me? Thanks for your work from before when we went on the offensive against the Nue."

"Kogure-san... And...!"

Harutora had met with the Divine General Kogure Zenjirou a few times in the spiritual disaster terrorist attack that happened last month, but Harutora's attention was currently almost all stolen away by the other person.

After the girl noticed Harutora, a complex expression flashed across her face, then she smiled coldly, putting an arrogant smile on her mouth. This kind of expression was more like her original appearance compared to her affected demeanor in the morning.

"Your face is as stupid as always, 'senpai'. Don't stare at me so passionately, I won't know what to do." A familiar tone came from Suzuka's mouth as she taunted Harutora.

Part 4

"It wouldn't do me any good to look for trouble with him now, right?"

Harutora wanted to speak with Suzuka alone, but Ohtomo and Kogure showed difficult expressions in unison when they heard this. Only when Suzuka said this did they reluctantly agree.

".....I can only give you five minutes."

"Don't be too agitated, Harutora-kun."

After saying this, Kogure and Ohtomo immediately left. But, they actually didn't walk very far, they just moved to the other side of the corridor, watching the two's every move from afar. Ohtomo and Kogure seemed to both be very clear about the animosity between Harutora and Suzuka, but considering that they couldn't stop them forever from coming in contact, they decided to just let them meet under their supervision altogether and save from future complications.

After being separated for a long time, Harutora and Suzuka only met again in the academy building corridor with Ohtomo and Kogure watching the situation from afar. But even if the two adults had given him the opportunity to prepare the dialogue, the two of them didn't know what to say to each other for some time and were only able to silently look at each other, let time pass, and invite each other to go on.

...Come on, didn't I come here for this goal?

Harutora urged himself on, quietly taking a deep breath to encourage himself.

"It's been a--"

"How is it?"

The two of them opened their mouths at almost the same time, but Suzuka's tone was a bit stronger, momentarily setting back Harutora's momentum.

"Huh? What do you mean....."

".....I~diot." Suzuka turned to avoid Harutora's eyes under his gaze. "I obviously mean the incident in the morning, I hope you suffered a bit."

".....It's as you expect, I was truly trapped."

"Hahaha, serves you right, that's called taking revenge."

"Then congratulations to you."

"Yup, I guess there was some worth in coming to the Onmyou Academy." Saying this, Suzuka finally turned to face Harutora, a brilliant smile filling her face.

...This damned brat.....

Harutora realized that he had come to talk with Suzuka this time, but he couldn't hold back his anger, frowning.

Come to think of it, though he hadn't forgotten about her personality, there was a kind of contradictory refreshing feeling from speaking with her after a long time, a kind of anger filled with a refreshing feeling.

"Your whole face was scared white back then, it was really laughable."

".....I wanted to ask you what was up with your greeting at the beginning. Don't go so overboard even if you're going to pretend to be well-behaved, I even thought I mistook you for the wrong person."

"Hmph - I'm not as stupid as you, and if you really want to talk about it, our positions are completely different. Do you know how our positions are different? You probably don't know, how could an ordinary student know."

"You're walking the path of an idol because our positions are different? Must be tough. I certainly don't understand much about positions, it must be really tough to be a Divine General."

Harutora couldn't help but rejoice that he had strictly ordered Kon before he had come here, barring her from appearing. Harutora and Suzuka wore haughty smiles, sparks flying between the two of them.

Both sides were in a stalemate, and Harutora simultaneously felt that it was an unavoidable stage.

To be honest, Suzuka's personality was twisted. The incident that had happened with Natsume last summer proved this point clearly, and the two of them couldn't open their hearts to each other without this wanton verbal abuse.

Moreover...

...It's annoying, but.....

He didn't hate it. Because they both spoke with their true intention, it was rather refreshing even if they were insults. Suzuka might also have a similar feeling.

"...Let me ask you," Harutora slowly cut to the chase. "Why did you come to the Onmyou Academy? The principal said it was because of certain reasons and at the urging of others..... Anyway, those reasons are probably just sugarcoating, right? What exactly is your true reason for entering the Onmyou Academy?"

"Hmph, I don't have a reason to explain everything to you. You're so stupid."

"Hey hey, how can you be so cold to the one you shared your first kiss with, sweetheart?"

Harutora spoke ironically, but Suzuka's lips curled reflexively in anger once she heard this. She returned a glare to Harutora, only saying after a while: ".....This is a penalty, a punishment, you should know without thinking, or else why would I be in this kind of stupid place."

"Punishment? Because of last year's incident?"

"Could there be any other possibility? .....Tch, you're so annoying, I'm a National First-Class Onmyouji, so why am I mixed in with these useless little brats? It's an insult!"

"How unfortunate."

"Who are you to say that! I originally shouldn't have even been alive anymore! Thanks to a certain someone..... I ended up being this miserable." Suzuka spoke, a self-deprecating smile appearing on her face. Her usual self-confident attitude couldn't be seen when she was this self-deprecating, and it even looked like she had somewhat low self-esteem. It seemed like she had inadvertently leaked her true feelings.

Harutora momentarily frowned, his expression serious.

"I'm glad a certain someone was there."

"......Ugh....."

Suzuka's face flushed when she heard this. She stared viciously at Harutora, but when Harutora looked back at her, she lowered her eyes, seeming to think about what kind of harmful words she could use to lambast her opponent..... However, she didn't end up saying any words. Then, like she wasn't going to let the opponent see her own expression, she turned her head to the side.

Harutora couldn't help but sigh lightly upon seeing Suzuka's childish opposition. He asked with as gentle of a voice as possible, "......Did you properly bury your brother afterwards?"

"......Yeah."

"That's good."

"....."

Suzuka lowered her eyes and turned her body, seeming like she was trying to hide the change in her expression. Harutora didn't force any questions, continuing to talk slowly.

"How long are you going to be punished?"

"......Three years, until I graduate."

"Three years, huh. But it's good that things will be resolved that way."

"......What do you mean, resolved? You're really a hopeless idiot. How can things be resolved like that, do you really understand what exactly I did?" The naive words of an outsider made Suzuka slightly regain some of her spirit, sneering at Harutora.

"Anyway, your homeroom teacher and other teachers will let it slip eventually, so since I have this opportunity, I'll tell you directly." Then, she suddenly lifted up her bangs with her right hand.

Suzuka revealed her forehead, and just as Harutora was wondering in incomprehension, he suddenly noticed that there was a small 'seal' on the girl's forehead. Two straight lines about one centimeter long crossed, drawing an 'X' mark.

When he saw that 'seal', Harutora immediately associated it with the pentagram on his cheek. Though the seal on Suzuka's forehead was far more delicate than the one on his own face, the two seemed very similar.

"Wh, What's with that? ......Magic?"

"Right, this is to seal my magical energy."

"Huh? So your magical energy is being sealed right now?"

"Didn't I just say that?"

"......Is this also a punishment?'

"You really love to ask stupid things."

Suzuka showed her forehead, her expression visibly disgusted. Then, Harutora approached her face, staring unblinkingly. That action made her face redden, and she hurriedly put her bangs down.

"...Actually, they just sealed a part of my magical energy, as I'm a researcher after all..... But I still committed taboo. On that note, sealing my magical energy is a loss to the entire magical community, so who knows how rotten their brains were to make such a stupid decision." She spoke quickly, seeming mad, but not a single bit of anger discernible from her.

Harutora could understand why they would use this kind of punishment.

Even one of the Twelve Divine Generals, no, because she was one of the Twelve Divine Generals, the Onmyou Agency recognized Suzuka who had brought about such an incident as a 'dangerous person'. If they let a 'dangerous person' enter the Onmyou Academy - even as a punishment - they should take countermeasures to reduce future troubles. If they sealed her abilities, the danger would be lessened even if she caused trouble in the future.

Suzuka's ability was outstanding, but she lacked a mature personality, and there was a giant disparity between the two. Even an outsider like Harutora had this feeling, and the Onmyou Agency couldn't possibly have failed to notice Suzuka's imbalanced condition. Sealing her abilities for now, letting her study at the Onmyou Academy with similarly aged students like she originally should have and trying to make her personality grow in the process might be an extremely suitable punishment.

It could be seen that the Onmyou Agency had quite a high appraisal of Suzuka's ability from how they had specially taken this response. Even with the incident she brought about, The Onmyou Agency still needed the 'Child Prodigy'.

"Don't forget, my magical energy wasn't completely sealed, and I could easily defeat a small fry like you, so be careful not to be too arrogant."

"I won't, and I didn't come to fight with you either."

"Hmph..... That's true, unless you were overconfident, you wouldn't have the courage to dare find me to fight."

"I won't do that." Harutora couldn't help but smile wryly upon hearing Suzuka's sarcastic response.

Harutora had a hard-to-forget painful memory because of Suzuka, and even now he still couldn't conclude that he was no longer afraid of her. Even so, Harutora noticed that he was becoming more and more able to understand Suzuka.

She was indeed hard to get along with, but she wasn't completely impossible to get along with.

"Anyway, what are you doing? Could it be that you still hate me, from what you did in the morning?"

He asked while pretending to be frivolous, and Suzuka went silent for a while, perhaps because she was hesitating over what harsh words to retort with. However, what she said in the end was: "......Hah, you're as stupid as always, that's called being self-centered. I'm a dignified Divine General, what reason do I have to bother with a person like you? The thing in the morning was because I happened to notice you standing down there and I felt like teasing you a bit." She deliberately used a disagreeable tone to speak. Harutora felt angered, unable to help but smile bitterly.

...Could this girl be even simpler than I thought?

Of course, Harutora might have just fallen into her trap.

"I can rest assured after hearing you say that. I also said just now, I hope to avoid conflict with you as much as possible."

"Don't think so much of yourself, last summer was an exceptional exception, you aren't qualified to be my opponent in the first place. You'd better first figure out how much you're worth."

Suzuka mocked him, her lips curling. Endure it, endure it, Harutora constantly warned himself to swallow back his words. But, Suzuka continued speaking.

"Ah, right, not just you, that next Tsuchimikado head - that Tsuchimikado Natsume - is also the same." After hearing her say this, Harutora's whole body unconsciously trembled, but fortunately Suzuka seemed not to notice. "I heard that all of the people in the Onmyou Academy make him out to be a genius, but to be honest, he's just a little amateur brat. You haven't forgotten, right? I absorbed the aura from his body last summer like it was nothing."

"......I, I didn't forget....."

Harutora managed to respond. At the same time as he responded, he desperately thought of countermeasures in his mind.

...Judging by those words.....

Suzuka hadn't yet noticed Natsume's true identity. Then, as if confirming Harutora's speculation--

"In the end, I didn't even see Tsuchimikado Natsume, what kind of a person is he? He should be much more powerful than you, right?"

"......I, I guess so."

"Hmph, I don't expect much anyway. Even if he's Yakou's reincarnation, he doesn't have the qualifications yet, and he even stays in this kind of place to study. He can't possibly be my opponent."

"Th, The reincarnation thing still can't be verified--"

"What kind of nonsense are you talking about? A National First-Class Onmyouji and a specialist in Yakou research like me decided that he was Yakou's reincarnation, could it be that you don't understand what that means?"

"Uh, but he doesn't have any awareness of it..... Didn't you mention that stuff called soul magic before? It doesn't have a reliable explanation either, right?'

He wasn't wrong, Suzuka hadn't noticed Natsume's true identity at all. Though this was true, Harutora really couldn't help but ask. The rumor that Natsume was Yakou's reincarnation had brought forth a lot of things, forcing her to suffer quite a bit since she had become aware of the world.

But he didn't expect that this question would backfire on him.

"Since you're wondering, let me meet him. That annoying person won't be supervising me anymore tomorrow, and I'm a bit interested in what kind of person Yakou's reincarnation is."

"Uh, that--!"

"Hmm? What is it? Is there a problem?"

Suzuka's face was full of suspicion, and Harutora was even more fretful, unable to think of what kind of good reason would let Natsume and Suzuka who were in the same Onmyou Academy avoid meeting. He was scared that he would be exposed immediately if he just said anything, especially since refusing her with a 'Natsume doesn't want to see Suzuka' might make Suzuka feel more interested instead, wanting even more to come in contact with Natsume.

...Damn.....!

What kind of excuse should he find to deal with this? Harutora hesitated, the surroundings shrouded with an awkward silent atmosphere.

Just then, "Dairenji, time's up." Kogure who was watching from afar helped him resolve the crisis without being asked. Kogure walked towards the two of them, taking out his phone to check the time. "Sorry, we've still got work to do, we should be leaving now." Suzuka knit her brow upon hearing those words, and it seemed like she wasn't putting on that fake pretense in front of Kogure, who was also a National First-Class Onmyouji.

".....Go if you want, I don't care." Her words were thorny, her tone exactly the same as when she had spoken with Harutora.

"Unfortunately, I have to bring you along today. Though your grades are different, you're both Onmyou Academy students anyway, so there will be opportunities later if you still have things to say." After saying this, Kogure cast a candid smile towards Harutora. "But I still need you for something." Then, his arm suddenly looped around Harutora's neck, drawing the surprised Harutora away from Suzuka's side.

"Wh, What do you need?" Harutora asked in a fluster, and Kogure quietly whispered secret words into Harutora's ear, his back still to Suzuka.

"How is it? Did anything strange happen around Natsume-kun after that terrorist attack last month?"

"N, No."

"That's good. It was chaotic at the time, and I wasn't able to greet you properly, but I heard from the tengu that you helped out a lot, so I've wanted to thank you in private for a while."

".....Uh....."

Just as Kogure said, Harutora almost hadn't had the opportunity to speak with this Independent Exorcist when the spiritual disaster terrorist attack had happened since the area had been in chaos. Though he had heard Natsume and Kyouko's

explanations, Harutora hadn't imagined at all that he would be this casual and frank - someone who did things at his own pace.

"Other than thanking you, there's also one more thing--" Saying this, Kogure lowered his voice. "I'm counting on you to help look after Dairenji. She isn't a bad person, her personality's just a bit twisted and she doesn't know how to interact with others."

Harutora inadvertently stared at Kogure. Kogure put his hand on Harutora's shoulder, grinning again.

"Don't make that kind of bitter face, I just hope that you can get along nicely. Don't worry, I didn't hear what you were talking about, but just by looking at your interaction, I'm confident that you can definitely get along well."

After finishing quietly speaking, Kogure didn't wait for Harutora's reply, releasing his arm and patting him a couple times on the shoulder as a goodbye.

".....Alright, let's go, Dairenji."

After leaving Harutora's side, Kogure urged Suzuka who was looking at them to hurry up and move on. Suzuka cast a hesitant gaze towards Harutora but didn't end up opening her mouth. She didn't wait for Kogure to come, walking towards the rear entrance a step ahead. Harutora didn't grab the opportunity, only able to silently watch Suzuka leave.

"Jin, I'm counting on you tomorrow."

"Yes, yes."

Uttering some final words to Ohtomo, Kogure and Suzuka vanished in the corridor together. Only Harutora and Ohtomo were left in the area.

Ohtomo's final reluctant reply had surprised Harutora. Also, if he hadn't misheard, Kogure seemed to have called Ohtomo by the name 'Jin'.....

Ohtomo noticed the doubtful and questioning gaze pointing at him from the side, shrugging his shoulders at Harutora.

"That guy and I are old friends. Never mind that for now, how are you? Do you think you can be peaceful with Suzuka-kun in the future?"

"Uh, I....."

Harutora couldn't reply for a while and Ohtomo smiled lightly. It didn't seem quite the same as Kogure's though they were both gentle smiles.

"I can probably guess what Zenjirou told you, but honestly, I also believe Suzuka-kun needs friends."

"F, Friends?"

"Right..... I don't know if you noticed or not, but Suzuka-kun's current position is about the same as Natsume-kun when she had just entered the Onmyou Academy, though the focus everyone had on them is completely reversed."

"......!"

After hearing his homeroom teacher's unexpected remark, Harutora was so shocked that his eyes inadvertently widened.

Harutora had transferred into the Onmyou Academy half a year late, and back then Natsume had deliberately kept a distance with her classmates, going about alone inside the classroom. One reason that led to that situation was Natsume's shy personality, but the most important reason was the rumor that she was Yakou's reincarnation, and also - Ohtomo didn't know either - Natsume even had to live her life hiding the fact that she was actually a female, and couldn't let others know. Before Harutora had come, Natsume didn't have any good friend that she could bare her heart to.

On the other hand, Suzuka was the 'Child Prodigy' of the Twelve Divine Generals, a famous person that everyone would recognize, even the new students who had just entered. Just a day after she had entered, she had become the idol of the students. However, Harutora knew very well that the 'Dairenji Suzuka' that the outside world interacted with was an act. No one understood Suzuka's personality, and the only person Suzuka could converse with unbridled was Harutora. In the aspect of being alone, Suzuka was completely the same as the Natsume from the past.

".....After you transferred, Natsume-kun's interpersonal relationships improved quite a bit, all due to you. This time, Suzuka-san has entered the Onmyou Academy, so why don't you help her again." After saying this, Ohtomo placed his hand on Harutora's shoulder, the shoulder on the other side of where Kogure had patted.

Harutora silently stood still, not knowing how to respond.

Chapter 3 - The Girl's Next Step

Part 1

The Onmyou Agency had ruled that she would enter the Onmyou Academy and study for three years as rehabilitation.

To say that person's face didn't flash through her mind when she first heard of this matter..... That wasn't possible. But you couldn't actually blame her for that, since that kind of thing had happened after all.

After things ended, since she couldn't help but be interested, she gathered quite a bit of information from the shadows, learning that that person's goal was to become an Onmyouji and that he had transferred in to the Onmyou Academy.

Hence, once she heard of this punishment: 'We can meet again.' She secretly thought to herself that they would meet again someday.

Also - fear welled up.

Once she thought of that person and thought of seeing him again, various emotions interlaced inside her heart. Hate, anger. Should she still use such means to mess with him, or should she use them to tease him?

... 'Shut up.'

Memories became clearer and clearer.

... 'Don't say another word.'

When the memories awakened, a chill instantly spread deep in her heart. She didn't care, nor was she angry, but her mood was heavy.

What exactly was wrong, was there a need to take it to heart? Even if she tried convincing herself, her feelings still didn't seem to improve. Worry, anxiety, anger. Even she herself didn't understand.

Those kinds of feelings were really powerful.

She had originally vowed from her heart to revive her brother, and had lived on this world just for that. She hadn't expected that her desire would be destroyed and her firm self-belief would shake with it. Precisely because she was this self-aware, her heart was lost and she couldn't stay together.

Her magical energy was sealed, her title as a Divine General was confiscated, and she turned back into an ordinary girl.

Suzuka was scared.

He had tricked her the first time they met, and had tried to stop her with his weak strength, obstructing her plans - in the end, he had saved her life instead. He was an enemy, but he had saved her small life that had no intention of remaining in this world.

In the end, only her brother and that person could face her so selflessly.

How would she change after she saw him again in the Onmyou Academy? Could she still keep her original demeanor? She had long since lost her original reason for living, and entering the Onmyou Academy where he was simultaneously served to find a 'new self' for her.

Suzuka felt frightened.

But she had no intention at all of escaping.

For some reason, the cherry blossoms seemed to have scattered all their petals in one

night. On the second day of the new term, the scene on the road from the male dorm to the academy felt lamentable to Harutora.

".....I never thought that going to school would be such a gloomy matter already on the second day after school started." The joy from yesterday couldn't be seen on Harutora's face, and actually he had had a hard time sleeping all yesterday night.

Moreover, he wasn't the only one who couldn't sleep.

"Bakatora, right now isn't the time to be gloomy, you should be even more tense than yesterday." Natsume unhappily scolded Harutora since she hadn't slept well, her tone even more tart than usual.

Harutora turned his spiritless face.

".....Natsume."

"What?"

"Those glasses are really unnatural."

"This is all I can do, what else is there? I don't want to wear glasses either!"

Today morning, Natsume was wearing a pair of glasses with a particularly crude frame.

Late last night, she had run to a glasses store that hadn't closed yet, buying this pair of fake glasses and planning on saying that she usually wore contact lenses but had accidentally lost them to deceive others. Since she was unable to decide to cut her long hair, she could only mask herself in this area.

After Harutora returned to the dorm yesterday, he had first gotten rid of the students who had come over to find out the truth of the rumors, then he had randomly greeted the new students who had moved into the dorm. Finally, he had called Natsume and Touji to gather in his room. He first detailed the entire incident of last summer,

reaching a common understanding, and then he had explained the process contacting Suzuka after school had ended, clarifying the problem and developing countermeasures.

They had discussed almost until dawn, but no clever tricks had showed up.

"The opponent's very perceptive, and since she's already focused on Harutora, all we can do right now is pray that she doesn't remember Natsume's appearance." Touji spoke while holding back a yawn.

Natsume inadvertently lowered her head, muttering: "......It's all Harutora's fault for being too impulsive." After saying this, she hurriedly pushed up the glasses slipping off her nose. "To think you would run out to find the 'Child Prodigy' before discussing it first..... And you even went by yourself!"

"Didn't I apologize many times for that matter yesterday?" Harutora, who was being scolded again for yesterday, spoke back, his expression bitter.

When they had discussed in his room yesterday, Natsume had actually been angriest about Harutora running out to find Suzuka. Harutora believed that never minding how things ended up turning out, contacting Suzuka hadn't been a poor judgment at the time.....

"On the other hand, if I didn't run out to find that person, we still wouldn't understand whether she had noticed your true identity, isn't that right?"

"You didn't need to go find her, I also knew that she still hadn't seen through my identity yet."

"Maybe, but you don't have any definite proof. Right now we know the reason that she entered the Onmyou Academy, and we also know that her magical energy has been sealed. There's a big difference between knowing and not knowing those things, right, Touji?"

"That information is certainly not a small gain." Touji also gave him that much certainty. "Natsume camouflaged her aura..... But the opponent's one of the Twelve Divine Generals, and they might run into each other often afterwards, so it's really doubtful whether the camouflage can succeed."

Normally, male and female human auras were different. Though the differences between individuals were large, males were mostly yang aura and females were mostly yin aura.

When Natsume was pretending to be a male, she used magic that turned her original aura into yang aura.

When contracting with servant shikigami and defensive shikigami - especially when contracting with strong independent shikigami, males usually chose a shikigami with yin aura because they carried yang aura. Since females carried yin aura, they normally chose shikigami with yang aura, though of course there were exceptions to this. When it was determined that she would be the next head to succeed the Tsuchimikado family, she simultaneously inherited the Tsuchimikado guardian dragon - Hokuto.

Dragon auras belonged to yin, conflicting with Natsume who had been born a female. Natsume had deliberately contracted with the dragon to let her original yin aura and the dragon's yin aura mix, creating a male aura - yang aura. This was quite an original magic, the work of Natsume's father, and Natsume herself was unable to cast it. This was an important reason why her male facade hadn't yet been seen through by people around her - the practitioners who could see aura.

After gaining Touji's approval, "See! Touji thinks so too!" Harutora called out, going over the material he had explained yesterday again.

"Especially since I cleared up a lot of things after talking with that girl again. Her ability's outstanding, but in the end she's a little girl. She's indeed cunning, and she's

extremely perceptive like Touji said, but she's definitely not an unredeemably bad person." the words Ohtomo had said yesterday still lingered in Harutora's heart, and the convincing power of that remark could be seen. Once he thought of the similarity between Suzuka and the past Natsume, he couldn't help but put force into his words. "Though she's troublesome, I'm still not completely helpless when it comes to dealing with her. Of course, I don't actually have any way to be certain, but I'll deal with her for now." Harutora tried convincing Natsume, speaking more and more animatedly, thinking that Natsume who had a similar experience could definitely understand his way of thinking.

His focus on the problem had been blurred - More accurately, Harutora hadn't noticed that he 'hadn't clearly understood where the problem was'.

Not only was Natsume unimpressed by Harutora's enthusiasm, her whole body slightly trembled instead as she angrily glared at Harutora. Was her almost tearful expression a mistaken impression? Touji half-closed his eyes, shaking his head as if saying 'You're really a Bakatora'.

"......Why....."

"Huh?"

"......Why do you always stand up for her?"

"What? I'm not standing up for her, though?"

"......Come to think of it, you were like this last summer as well. You didn't care about my warnings and you were still confident that you could convince her....." Natsume glared firmly at the confused Harutora, her tone angry for some reason.

"Last summer..... What weird things have you been talking about since just now?" Harutora asked back, completely baffled. Natsume's gaze glanced down, no longer staring intently into Harutora's eyes, and swept over Harutora's lips.

She tightened her lips, snapping in a low voice, "......Enough!" - her voice sounded like it was a bit depressed - and walked ahead on her own, her black hair whipping around.

Cherry blossoms swirled in the gentle breeze.

Harutora wasn't actually angry, just confused, casting a pleading glance towards Touji. Touji shook his bandanna-bound head, showing a difficult expression.

"......It seems like that brat is Natsume's Achilles Heel."

"Wh, What does that mean?"

Harutora's face sank, and his good friend didn't say anything else, just helplessly shrugging his shoulders.

"Anyway, we can't let her see Natsume, so it's up to you to be the 'Child Prodigy's opponent..... Though we're just trying to trick her, do your best."

"I know that."

"Right now it's enough just to do that." Touji spoke, patting Harutora's back. "Today, let's first think of a way to avoid letting Suzuka and Natsume meet, and as for what to do later - we'll think about it when the time comes."

Touji - whose expression was encouraging for some reason - smiled at Harutora.

The cherry blossoms danced in the wind, soundlessly falling on the perplexed shikigami's head.

Part 2

Unfortunately, the situation was far more urgent than he had imagined.

"Good morning, senpai!"

The classroom door was forcefully pulled open, and Suzuka walked in beaming with a smile - a devilish smile. The entire classroom immediately erupted in a clamor.

The second day of the new term, a terrorist assault was launched right after the first class, instantly hijacking all of the students' attention. Of course, Harutora and Natsume were also included among these students.

Terror and despair were followed by his thoughts stopping. Touji was the only person who could be relied on to deal with this sudden situation.

In the Onmyou Academy, the students could change seats however they wanted. Right now, Harutora and Natsume's seats were right next to each other, and Touji sat behind them.

"...Natsume." Touji warned quietly, as if neatly snapping a whip. Natsume immediately came to her senses when she heard this, hastily casting stealth magic. Simultaneously, Touji kicked Harutora's chair from under the table.

Harutora suddenly jumped, standing up.

".....U, Uwah, D, Dairenji! I, It's been a while!"

Harutora was panicked, stumbling out of his seat in order to get away from Natsume and get Suzuka's attention focused on him. Doing this had extremely great side effects. Kyouko, Tenma, and the other classmates cast excited gazes at Harutora one by one, perking their ears up at the two people.

Since his response had been really strange and embarrassed, Suzuka forgot the role she was currently acting out for a while even though she had come to attack, her face

growing suspicious. But, as expected of her having experienced many storms, her expression was still calm even though she had doubts.

"That's mean, Senpai, what do you mean it's been a while, didn't we just 'meet' 'yesterday' 'after school'? And it was 'just the two of us'... Ah, could that be a secret that you didn't want anyone else to know? Sorry--"

"Uh! .....No, that's not it - But, this is the second-year classroom, so what exactly did you come here for--"

"Well, it would be stupid not to see each other since we're in the same school~ I wanted to at least come to greet you!"

"Liar..... Ah, it's nothing, so you came to greet me. You don't actually have to come here just for that kind of thing....."

He didn't grit his teeth, replacing it with a stiff smile instead. He quickly approached Suzuka, which naturally drew Suzuka's attention, not letting her notice the direction of Natsume. But to the eyes of the bystanders, maybe they would believe he couldn't wait to come forward to meet her, as after all there was no other possibility on the surface.

"H-Harutora..... You really....."

"W, Wow, Harutora-kun, wow."

Kyouko’s eyes widened and Tenma couldn't conceal his excitement. The other students' reactions were about the same. Harutora desperately kept himself from shouting out angrily.

"Haha..... The break will be over really soon, so since you've already greeted me, you'd better return to your own classroom, Dairenji."

"Senpai, you're being too unfamiliar! Just call me Suzuka."

"Stop it, just go back to your classroom!"

Unfortunately, his self-control power wasn't strong enough.

"Ugh, senpai's so cold." Suzuka deliberately made an overdone reaction under the stares of the audience. On some level, this counted as a type of second-class magic, and the effects were excellent, with the class's stares focused on Harutora and Suzuka gradually rising in temperature.

Among the heated gazes, Harutora felt a malice that sent chills up his back that could even be called killing intent. For some reason, Natsume's glaring face immediately appeared in his mind, but in this kind of emergency time he couldn't turn around to check.

"......Come here for a bit." Harutora grabbed Suzuka's hand, forcefully pulling her into the corridor. Exclamations rang out all over the classroom, but he ignored them, pretending that nothing happened.

"Don't overdo it this much. Didn't you say yesterday that it was just a prank?" After entering the corridor, he forcefully lowered his voice and spoke.

"Shut up, the first-year classroom is way too stupid." Now that the surrounding gazes had vanished, Suzuka quickly showed her original self.

"Are you just pulling me in to pass the time? Why don't you use that time to make friends with the new students?"

"What are you joking about, how could the Onmyou Academy's new students have the qualifications to interact with me. Ah, of course that goes for you too."

"In that case, at least choose the new students."

"I don't want to, it's too tiring."

"That's because you're too fake! Come to think of it, could you be planning on faking like this for three years? You definitely won't be able to hold on for that long!"

After Harutora criticized her, Suzuka frowned in anger. It seemed like these words had perfectly hit the mark.

"......So annoying."

"It's the truth."

"......And you're hurting me."

"Huh? Ah, sorry."

He hadn't let go of her hand since the beginning. Once he let go, Suzuka quickly drew back her left hand that had been grabbed, gently rubbing it with her right hand.

The two of them went silent for a few seconds, then Suzuka tilted her head, looking at Harutora.

"......Hey, which one's Tsuchimikado Natsume? You're classmates, right?"

Harutora wasn't quite sure whether he was successful in hiding his shaken heart. "Uh, well..... We're classmates, that's right....." His attitude was casual, but he stammered as he spoke.

Once a poor lie was exposed, it would lead to the other becoming easily suspicious. He had learned this from Touji in the fruitless all-night talk. But he still couldn't conclude how exactly he should deal with this.

The situation wasn't unexpected. "...Let me see him." Suzuka tried to peek into the classroom, and Harutora frantically stopped her. "Ah, hold on!"

"Why? Is there something I can't see?"

"Th, There's nothing you can't see. Anyway, I've had enough of how my classmates look at me! You're not bored anymore, right? Hurry up and return to your classroom!"

"What? How can you order me around like that? And why do I have to listen to your instructions?"

"I'm begging you! Though I can't compare to you, I also have an image to take into consideration and I don't want to have no place in my class!"

Harutora desperately changed the topic, and fortunately the other party accurately sensed how anxious he was. "That doesn't matter to me~". The more frantic he got, the more maliciously Suzuka laughed, continuing to tease Harutora. Harutora sacrificed himself to try to stall for time.

Five minutes later, the bell sounding the start of class finally saved him from his misery.

Unfortunately, the calamity didn't end like that.

"Senpai, why don't we eat lunch together?"

The next bomb detonated at lunchtime, in the center of the raucous academy cafeteria. Suzuka put an omurice on her tray, racing towards the table where Harutora and the others were.

Harutora accidentally spat out all the broth of his tempura udon, and Natsume beside him forcefully pushed back her chair, crouching on the ground. In order to conceal the sound she made, Touji suddenly also stood up from his chair.

Natsume took into consideration the surrounding noise, desperately casting stealth magic. She managed to fix her glasses, keeping her crouching posture while escaping the cafeteria with all her power. In order to distract Suzuka, Harutora also stood up like Touji, waving his hand affectedly. "Yo, D-Dairenji!"

The surrounding gazes stabbed into him mercilessly and his back broke out in a cold sweat.

On the other hand, his exaggerated action made Suzuka furrow her brows again. But before she asked, she noticed that she knew the boy standing next to Harutora.

"Huh, you are....."

"You still remember me? Harutora and I collaborated to trick you back then, sorry about that." Touji spoke calmly, not one bit of apology visible on his face. Maybe thinking of the incident during the festival last year, Suzuka replied with an "Oh", her face solemn.

"You were together back then..... What, you were also an Onmyou Academy student?"

"I wasn't back then. This guy and I only transferred into the Onmyou Academy together after that incident ended."

Suzuka's expression seemed slightly surprised upon hearing Touji's explanation. Transferring into the famous Onmyou Academy in the middle of a term - there were very few students who could successfully test in like this. Maybe Harutora from the Tsuchimikado branch family could get in, but to the eyes of someone who didn't understand Touji's origins, such an example was extremely rare.

Suzuka was silent for a while, staring at Touji with both eyes. But not long after, her mood quickly changed. "Can I sit here~" She deliberately made her voice higher, choosing the seat next to Touji and across from Harutora to sit down.

Once she sat down, she immediately blinked.

"Huh? Why is there a half-eaten bowl of chicken and egg rice here?"

The bowl of rice Suzuka was asking about was placed on the seat adjacent to Harutora - the chicken and egg rice that Natsume hadn't been able to finish eating just now.

"Uh, th, that's--!"

"That's Harutora's." Touji sat back in his seat leisurely, carefully replying in place of the panicked Harutora.

"He has to eat enough for two people to be full."

"Yeah, that's right! That's how it is, I'm in my growing phase, you know."

"...Oh, I see, your appetite's really amazing--" Suzuka's attitude was still feigned, but her tone was cold, her gaze freezing. Harutora laughed dryly a couple times and was about to sit down, when "......So stupid, what 'growing phase'." Suzuka ridiculed him with a face full of scorn. Harutora cursed this damn brat in his heart but couldn't do anything about it.

His temple inadvertently twitched and he forcefully clenched his teeth, forcing a smile onto his face and pushing a thin voice out of his lips.

"......What do you want this time?"

"Nothing, I just want to eat lunch together."

"Go eat with your classmates."

"I don't want to, they're too annoying."

"They're not the annoying ones, you are! You shouldn't be pretending, it's way too reckless."

"Shut up, can't you be a little more quiet when you're eating? I can't stand hicks like you--"

"Before you came to annoy me, we always ate very quietly!"

Harutora couldn't hold back his agitated emotions for a while, and Touji smiled wryly, calling out to him: "Harutora." Then, he turned his gaze towards Suzuka by his side.

"......It seems like you no longer hate me or Harutora."

"Hmph, I told this idiot yesterday too, your thinking is so self-centered. How would I have the time to care about you small fry."

"That's extremely reasonable. So, are you truly just passing time when you come find Harutora to trouble him?"

"Th, That's right, could there be any other reason?"

"Yeah, it's not like I can't understand your feelings. After all, it's hard to pass up messing with such an interesting person."

"You're pretty knowledgeable, but those words are flattering him."

"......Hold on, Touji, which side are you on exactly..... And Dairenji, that's not flattering at all."

You two... Harutora stared at the two of them upsettedly.

Suzuka feigned happiness, raising her pitch and saying "Hey, you're too unfamiliar, Senpai! Just call me Suzuka!" Harutora became more and more impatient as he listened.

"Right." Suzuka changed her tone again. "I didn't end up seeing Tsuchimikado Natsume just now, where's he sitting?" Saying this, she sized up the surrounding cafeteria a bit.

Not again, Harutora's face tightened. Unfortunately, Suzuka seemed to have already started shifting all of her attention towards Natsume.

"H, He, uh..... He's usually outside--"

"He's done eating." Touji interrupted Harutora's excuse, grabbing on and continuing to speak. "He wasn't feeling well today, so he went back to the classroom without even eating much." He spoke casually, and at the same time didn't forget to warn Harutora with his eyes.

Natsume was famous in the academy, and anyone could learn by asking a random student that she always ate with Harutora and Touji. Touji had warned that suspicions would be aroused once a poor lie was exposed, and that meant exactly this kind of situation.

Touji continued to speak with a composed expression.

"What's wrong, are you still very interested in Natsume after that incident happened?"

That incident meant the event that had happened last summer. Suzuka was discomfited facing Touji's light provocation, hastily trying to speak out to deny it, but she probably thought Touji was different from Harutora, ".....I guess I can't say I'm completely uninterested." She unexpectedly admitted honestly.

"I told this person the same thing yesterday, that though they removed me from my post, I was always a specialist of magic pertaining to Tsuchimikado Yakou. The Imperial Onmyoudou that Yakou founded still contains many mysteries that we don't

understand, and if Tsuchimikado Natsume can become the clue to solving these mysteries, I can't ignore him no matter how small that possibility is." Suzuka poked her spoon into the omurice, mixing it around.

"......There's not enough ketchup." Next to the complaining Divine General, Touji glanced at Harutora. Harutora quietly nodded his head to reply with a serious face.

The situation was extremely urgent. Suzuka would definitely take any measures to find an opportunity to approach Natsume in the future, so how exactly could they stop her actions?

"Hmph - Whatever, it's too annoying to chase him to his classroom anymore now. Why don't you tell me what kind of a person Natsume is."

Suzuka rudely waved her spoon at the two, her mouth full of omurice. Her appearance was immature and cute, but her attitude was like a queen commanding her footman. Harutora helplessly pulled up an insignificant topic, exaggerating Natsume's masculinity as much as possible.

His days of concealing the secret and walking a tightrope hadn't ended.

Lunchtime seemed extraordinarily slow compared to the very brief after-class break time.

"I like Harutora's idea."

During the time after the first afternoon class, when they were in the emergency stairwell to escape the rumors flying around the classroom, Touji frankly expressed his opinion towards Harutora and Natsume.

"What?" Natsume asked back. "Wh, What idea of Harutora-kun's?"

"His method regarding dealing with Dairenji. I think Harutora should find her again, no, he should find her as much as possible and have open-minded conversations with her."

Touji's sudden turnaround surprised Harutora, and Natsume's eyes also widened. In particular, not only did Natsume's eyes widen, but she even shouted: "No!". She pushed her slipping glasses back onto her nose while saying: "That's too dangerous! What if Harutora-kun reveals a slip that's even more serious? Doing that will only make things more difficult, I can't let him loose to continue digging his own grave!"

Natsume was dissatisfied - that remark in turn made Harutora dissatisfied - and Touji shrugged his shoulders at the two of them, saying: "I don't think so", denying Natsume's opinion.

"Harutora's approach has been more successful than we imagined, and it would be best to let him chat a bit more - gaining the opponent's trust, in case we need it in the future."

"In case we need it in the future..... What does that mean?"

"It means exactly what the words say. It's the most direct method in the current circumstances, and all we can do now is take precautions." Touji's face was calm as he spoke convincingly.

Touji always acted after thinking, so that profound statement hence sounded even deeper. But, the meaning of Touji's statement was really overly vague.

"I don't understand what that means, but anyways the priority is to avoid coming in contact with her as much as possible." Natsume retorted ferociously, her expression grave and stubborn. Her look showed an unmovable conviction as she glared at Touji.

Touji spoke strangely upon seeing this: "That's what I myself think, so forgive me if I offended you..... Honestly, you and that person are very similar."

"M, Me?"

"Right." Touji spoke deliberately teasingly. "Especially how both of you aren't straightforward. Right, it's also very similar how your personalities are like a child's."

Hearing Touji say this, Natsume's face momentarily flushed, but Harutora looked at Touji again in surprise.

Harutora hadn't mentioned Ohtomo's words to Touji, but Touji had a similar view as Ohtomo. It was evident that Suzuka and Natsume were indeed similar in some ways. Thinking carefully, the situation today noon could act as proof, as Suzuka had eaten alone right after entering the academy. It really made it impossible to not associate it with Natsume when she had just entered.

However, "I'm very grateful that you say that..... But rather than giving this matter to me, honestly, I think you're more suitable to be her opponent. Your attitude just now was much calmer than mine." After hearing Harutora's proposal, Natsume's expression suddenly lit up, and it seemed like he could hear her yell from her heart: 'That's it!'

She changed her opposing attitude.

"Th, That's right, Harutora-kun's right! I can relax if we leave it to Touji-kun - Ah, no, I trust Touji-kun, so let's leave it for Touji-kun to deal with!"

"Tch..... Natsume, your change in attitude is a bit too obvious, right?"

"I, I didn't! I was just..... Well..... I, I just believe that we shouldn't let Harutora-kun approach her rashly, and maybe Touji-kun's a more suitable choice.....!" Natsume frantically explained, short of breath. She seemed quite satisfied with Harutora's proposal.

However, "No." Touji refused Harutora's proposal in a breath. "Harutora is the most suitable choice. In particular, judging by the current situation, it's only meaningful if Harutora steps forward."

"Wh, Why?" Harutora blurted out a question and Touji didn't reply directly, just showing a solemn gaze. "You all believe I'm the most suitable person to deal with that girl, and I decide to leave this matter to Harutora."

"Touji, isn't that a little too much wordplay?"

"Whatever you say. Anyway, this matter is left to Harutora."

"B, But.....!"

"Natsume." Touji snapped sternly, facing the opinionated Natsume who refused to rest. "Since we can't find any excuses in time that will keep you from meeting Suzuka, the only thing we can do right now is to escape Suzuka's gaze as much as possible. But, we can't escape forever, so if we take the initiative and contact Suzuka, we can restrict her movements and even drag things out for a while. We won't need to fear your true identity being exposed for now."

"But, Touji-kun can also be responsible for that--!"

"What's wrong, you trust Harutora that little?" Touji replied maliciously.

"I.....!" Natsume glanced at Harutora with no reply. She lowered her head, her lips tight, clearly unwilling. Harutora wasn't angry when he saw her reacting so unwillingly, but he felt depressed instead that he was so untrustworthy.

The expression that Touji looked at the two with became wry. Then, he turned his head to face Harutora, who still didn't get it.

"No matter what, Harutora, you don't need to be troubled over what to do. You just need to find Dairenji and chat like normal, and maybe you'll unexpectedly notice some way to resolve things." Touji spoke leisurely - even a bit cheerfully.

Touji, who loved causing trouble, had pushed things onto him, so maybe he had a premonition that something would definitely happen. No, not just Touji, anyone could see that doing this was bound to stir up a lot of controversy in the future.

Harutora sighed. He had no choice other than nodding his head in assent.

Part 3

After school ended that day, Harutora immediately took action and headed towards the first-year classroom in order to find Suzuka as early as possible.

He didn't actually know what he would talk about after meeting her, but he would rather strike of his own initiative than cower in the classroom waiting for the opponent to attack.

Following yesterday, Harutora had appeared in front of the classroom two days in a row, and the new students' attentive gazes were more excited than yesterday. Unfortunately, he had still drawn a blank this time and heard at once that Suzuka had already left the classroom.

With the lesson from yesterday, this time Harutora unhesitatingly left the first-year classroom.

".....Kogure-san shouldn't have come today, right? Could it be that she already went back....."

Compared to how she always appeared at a deadly moment, he just wasted his time even when he took the initiative to go on the offensive, running around in circles.

Harutora decided that today he would go to the academy rear entrance first to test his luck, but he really didn't have any luck to speak of, and didn't notice Suzuka on the way to the rear entrance. If she had already left the academy building, it would really be difficult to find her by relying on the strength of a single person.

"She's not here, huh. I'll wait here for a bit." Saying this, he opened the door, checking the situation outside.

There were narrow alleys accessing the main roads outside the academy building's rear entrance, the lanes small enough to barely accommodate cars passing through.

Almost no one traveled these small alleys, but when Harutora walked outside, he noticed that there was a figure walking towards the main road.

She wore a pure white uniform, her body small, her uniform's size overly large and the sleeves overly long. He seemed to recognize the figure that was quickly trotting away.

"Ah, Senpai!" Harutora hastily called out and the female student stopped walking in response, turning around. She was the third-year senpai that he had run into after school yesterday.

She seemed to also remember Harutora. After all, she had been the one to recognize Harutora first yesterday and speak with him.

She looked backwards over her shoulder.

"Ah, the little girl's--"

"I'm Tsuchimikado Harutora! Also, senpai knew me long before I introduced myself, right? Why do you say 'little girl' as soon as you see me? And what words were you planning on attaching at the end!"

"Master."

"At least put 'shikigami' in the middle there, please."

Once talk like 'the little girl's master' spread, the criticism received would surely surpass what he received for being Suzuka's ex-boyfriend. Doing this and that with a shikigami in the form of a young girl wasn't something that could be fudged over easily.

Harutora decided not to mind this matter for now, rushing up to the senpai who was about to walk onto the road.

"Senpai, I have something to ask you--"

"What is it? Little girl shikigami's master?"

"......I didn't mean I wanted you to call me that....."

"You have a lot of requests."

"I don't have a lot of requests at all, I just want you to call me by my name like normal!"

"Young people these days speak really impolitely."

"Senpai, you aren't allowed to say that."

"Though I'm small, I pay attention to hierarchy when I speak."

"That has nothing to do with body size."

"Thine words must contain respect."

"What kind of hierarchy is that! You're just messing with me!"

He just wanted to hear of Suzuka's whereabouts, but he hadn't made any progress. Harutora breathed deeply, desperately holding back his impulses and trying to stay as stable as possible.

"Alright..... Senpai, could I ask whether you saw Dairenji Suzuka before you left through the back entrance? You know who Dairenji Suzuka is, right? She's the 'Child Prodigy' of the Twelve Divine Generals."

"I know, the little girl who confessed to you."

"......Don't mention little girls any more."

"The 'Child' in 'Child Prodigy' describes a girl who is little--"

"Did you see her or not!"

Harutora thought that he would probably have a very hard time seeing this senpai as an elder. Spit scattered as he roared loudly, wondering about how it seemed that he had started shouting at people everywhere since yesterday.

Before Harutora's raised voice, the senpai replied honestly: "I saw her."

"Huh, really? Did you see her here?"

"I won't tell you for free."

"Tch."

"I want to see the shikigami from yesterday."

The senpai made her request leisurely. Harutora stared at her, cursing this damn girl on the inside. Of course, the senpai's calm expression didn't waver at all from this.

"......Kon."

Harutora reluctantly called Kon and Kon immediately appeared in midair and descended to the ground as her tail and hakama lightly swayed.

"You heard her, right? Please greet her."

"A-A-As you command....." After Kon replied, she furiously cast a vicious gaze towards the senpai.

The shikigami Kon was extremely loyal to her master Harutora but had a bad attitude to others. In particular, she would exhibit explicit animosity when facing those who endangered Harutora.

She naturally displayed respect towards the senpai on the surface and was hostile in her heart. "......Greetings, I am Kon, the descendant of the ancestral fox Kuzunoha, the retainer of Tsuchimikado Harutora-sama." She spoke bluntly and made a bow done as a formality.

However, the senpai immediately knelt down to see Kon's lowered face clearly. Looking from such a close distance made Kon inadvertently look up.

The senpai held her gaze at a similar height as the restless shikigami's, staring at her without looking away. Her blank eyes rounded slightly, her lips tight. Since her expression was blank, her appearance looked quite frightening.

"Ah, senpai! I just let you look at her, don't do whatever you like."

"How rude, I wasn't doing that."

"You're staring so hard at her that those words really don't sound convincing."

The senpai didn't respond, still staring intently at Kon. Did she truly like little girls that much? Harutora couldn't help but worry.

...But.....

Though Kon was young, her appearance was quite proper and exquisite, like a Japanese doll. On the other hand, though the senpai's appearance didn't count as peculiar, she was also a truly beautiful girl. If Kon was a Japanese doll, then senpai was a bisque doll.

These two people - and both were very small - looked at each other from a very close distance. To the eyes of Harutora who looked on from the side, this scene was like two living dolls looking curiously at something similar to themselves.

".....Nn."

The senpai stared for about one minute and finally stood up, recovering to her usual placid, calm expression.

"How satisfying."

".....That's good."

"But I haven't tasted--"

"I'll hit you!"

"I'm joking."

The senpai spoke calmly, but Harutora couldn't laugh and Kon's face became dismal. Though it was to obtain information, this wasn't an enjoyable mission after all.

"Did you make this?"

"How's that possible, I'm not that incredible. She's a shikigami that serves my family - the Tsuchimikado branch family."

"I see....." The senpai nodded. "So you didn't set that seal either?"

Harutora couldn't help but ask back upon hearing that unexpected question: "Huh?" Then, he immediately thought of an incident that had happened before.

The first time Ohtomo had met Kon, he had also said something similar, mentioned something like a 'seal'. Harutora hadn't heard of anything related, but since Ohtomo-sensei and the Onmyou Academy third-year student believed this, they couldn't possibly both be wrong or mistaken.

...There was a seal on her?

The person herself, Kon, was taken aback when she heard what the senpai said. It seemed that she herself didn't know about this either.

His own shikigami had a seal that he didn't know about. Harutora was actually quite troubled, but he and Kon had gotten along for more than half a year, so Suzuka's matter was a priority right now.

"You said you would tell me, so where did you see Dairenji?"

Harutora asked again. Things had been a bit too frustrating just in order to ask about this small matter.

However, the senpai didn't directly reply to Harutora's question. She raised her right hand wordlessly, pointing a finger, and "...One, two..." counting to three in front of the perplexed Harutora and Kon. "Huh, so this is where you were." Suzuka just happened to open the back door and walked out of the academy building. "Dairenji!" Harutora also turned his head in shock.

"Where did you go just now?"

"I wanted to ask you that, I even especially went to your classroom."

"What? For what?"

"N, None of your business! ...Ah, right, I went to find Tsuchimikado Natsume, you shouldn't even need to ask....." Suzuka replied, her expression a bit flustered for some reason, but Harutora didn't actually have the energy to observe Suzuka's reaction carefully.

"Did you see him?"

"No, he wasn't there anymore when I arrived."

It seemed that Natsume had left the classroom a step ahead and hadn't crossed paths with Suzuka. Harutora, whose face had paled from fright, finally relaxed his breath.

"I, I see, so we just missed each other."

"Missed..... Could you have come to my classroom to find me?" Suzuka smiled coldly, deliberately showing a disgusted - but she actually didn't look like it - expression. "You should just give up on that thought. I said before, but I have no interest in you, so please don't follow me around however you want."

"Shut up, why would I follow you around."

He had just been tossed around by a senpai and now he was being tormented by a kouhai. Harutora couldn't help but wonder whether the Onmyou Academy had any normal students at all.

"Whatever, do what you want..... Right, senpai? Th--" As Harutora turned around, the senpai's figure was no longer there before he could even finish speaking.

"H-Harutora-sama." Harutora looked along the direction Kon pointed, and noticed that the figure of the senpai's back had appeared on the road, about to turn around the corner of the academy building. She was really a random girl.

"......What a difficult person to understand....."

Harutora scratched his head with a bitter face. Suzuka knit her brows, not understanding what had happened.

But--

Once she noticed Kon, her expression changed for some reason. At the moment, all of Harutora's attention was on the senpai, and he didn't notice her change. She hid the wavering in her heart, desperately keeping calm.

"......Why were you looking for me?"

"Well, it's nothing actually....." Harutora didn't know how to respond to that question. "R, Right." He pondered and the finally asked with an awkward tone:

"Are you free later?"

They walked into a random nearby fast food store. Strangely, Suzuka seemed restless as soon as they entered the store.

"What's wrong?" Harutora asked.

"N, Nothing! I just don't come to this kind of store very often....."

Harutora was greatly surprised and couldn't help but laugh at the fact that Suzuka hadn't entered this kind of fast food store before. As a result, Suzuka lambasted him and he ended up having to treat her to a burger, fries, and a milkshake to cool her down.

But--

This girl really was very similar to Natsume.....

They both lacked societal 'common sense', which was enough to prove that they had grown up in a peculiar environment. In the eyes of a normal person, the magic community was quite a peculiar world in the first place, but they knew nothing of the world outside the magic community.

...So they were all lacking in unexpected areas.

Harutora thought while looking at Suzuka sipping her milkshake through a straw, reacting in great surprise to the sticky feeling.

".....Hey, you couldn't be thinking about something opinionated, are you?"

"Oh, you're very keen. I was just thinking you were pretty cute."

"Uwah, you're so annoying! What are you joking about, don't forget your position, your place is under mine! You small fry!"

Suzuka let go of the straw, her face red. Harutora showed a smile, his expression leisurely.

Then--

Harutora looked for the next topic, but he actually didn't have any goal other than resolving Natsume's problem. If he had to say so, he might grudgingly count 'enhancing mutual friendship' as the current goal.

Harutora turned his thinking into chatting mode.

"Are you used to the Onmyou Academy yet?"

"I'm warning you, don't take that kind of arrogant attitude! Do you think you're amazing or something?"

"Hey, that's not what I mean, I was just chatting. It's nothing to get agitated about, right?"

"Nonsense, look at your overbearing demeanor!"

"You're just deliberately picking on things..... Oh, but I can probably guess the answer, it's not too unexpected."

"What? What does that mean?"

"In any case, you definitely can't integrate with everyone, right?'

"I-I-It's not your business! Especially since I didn't intend to from the beginning! Not one bit!" Suzuka howled angrily, but Harutora just smiled wryly. He added milk to his hot coffee. "Isn't that a bit of a pity? Maybe you'll find some people unexpectedly interesting after talking."

"Let me remind you again, don't forget who I am and remember it well with that useless little brain! Someone interesting? Idiot, how could there be anyone interesting, their levels and mine are way too different!"

"Other than the Twelve Divine Generals, you won't find any others who can match you in Onmyoudou power. Actually, you shouldn't stick to level gaps. Even if your levels are different, I believe there are a lot of people with charming natures."

"What the hell are you talking about, you're talking like an old geezer. And what's a charming nature?"

"One of the best examples is right in front of you."

"God! Please don't take idiots as interesting, alright? Low-level and stupid, it really sucks to be you!"

"Well, you're too young, you still don't understand my charm..... Better eat your hamburger while it's still warm, do you know how to open the wrapping paper?"

"If you dare look down on me again, I might kill you!"

Once he felt that she was similar to Natsume, Harutora's chatter couldn't be stopped for some reason. In addition, he could freely speak words that he was unable to say to Natsume's face. Could it be that Touji had assigned this matter to him because he had seen through this already?

Harutora smiled on the inside, chewing the hamburger in his hand. He only noticed when he was halfway done eating that Suzuka's forehead was sweating and her eyes were staring unmovingly at the hamburger.

Harutora couldn't help but snicker, wordlessly reaching out his hand without paying heed to Suzuka's exclamation from the side. He silently opened the wrapping paper, putting it back on her tray.

Suzuka gaped blankly, then said: ".....Tch! S, So it's that simple! You just pull it open!"

"Right, it's that simple."

"I'll kill you! I'll definitely kill you!"

"Hey, why are you so ungrateful." Harutora smiled, drinking a mouthful of coffee.

Beforehand, he hadn't expected that he would be chatting so happily with Suzuka, and even if Suzuka griped, he knew that she was similarly cheerful from the atmosphere of the chat. But, she would definitely throw a tantrum if he pointed this out.

"Honestly, it would be good if you kept this kind of aggressive attitude in your class."

"Idiot, how many times do I have to say before you understand, I need to consider my position. Do you understand what a position is or not?"

"Is that position so important to the current you?"

"What? What exactly are you--"

"Let me ask you, is your identity as a Divine General so important?"

"Uh--!"

Suzuka couldn't say anything for a while, depressed. Harutora feared that maybe he had carelessly touched a sensitive topic, hastily continuing to speak.

"Well, of course I don't understand how much self-respect a Divine General has, and I'm not sure what kind of position you're holding onto. But I think that entering the Onmyou Academy is a great opportunity for you, and..... Your brother's matter has also come to an end already, and you have to think about your future now. Maybe you can find a new goal."

Harutora spoke sincerely, his tone like always. His remark had no intent of reproaching her at all, but Suzuka's eyes widened as she listened, staring at Harutora. Her face reddened..... Faint moistness showed vaguely in her eyes, and her lips were pressed tightly together. She didn't make any response.

Harutora didn't have any other thoughts, but once he saw Suzuka's response, "Uh." He couldn't help but think about what he had said. "......Sorry, that was thoughtless of me. Those things are very important, whether your identity as a Divine General, or..... the matter of your brother."

Suzuka's life experience - she had mentioned the situation regarding her parents with her own mouth last summer. Her parents were Onmyouji and had used their

biological children as experimental subjects, killing their son - Suzuka's brother as a result.

When Suzuka had been born - even since before she was born - she had been irrevocably tied to magic. She hated and cursed it, but she was still indoctrinated with her biological parents' magic. And to revive her brother, she practiced desperately, aspiring to become a powerful Onmyouji.

In Suzuka's heart, being a Divine General definitely had quite far-reaching implications.

"Sorry." Harutora sincerely apologized to Suzuka. Suzuka didn't say anything. On one hand, Harutora regretted his thoughtlessness, but on the other he clenched his teeth to endure the silent, depressed atmosphere.

After some time, "......Why....." Suzuka spoke with her head lowered.

"What?"

"......Why are you so....." After managing to force out those words, she pressed her lips together again, falling silent. But just before Harutora planned on opening his mouth, she raised her head as if sweeping away the haze in her heart, stubbornly staring at Harutora.

"......That little girl with you just now was a shikigami, right? Was it yours?"

"Huh? Oh, right..... But I didn't make her."

The sudden topic confused Harutora for a while, but he still replied truthfully. After Suzuka heard that, her expression became clearly surprised.

"Y, You didn't make it?"

"No, her name's Kon, she's a shikigami who serves the Tsuchimikado branch family."

"......I, I see, I thought....."

"Thought what?"

"No, well....."

Suzuka stammered, a self-derisive smile suddenly appearing on her face. "That's true, how could you make such a refined shikigami. Also..... her type isn't similar to the shikigami from that time at all....." A crooked smile hung on her lips as she muttered as if talking to herself.

Harutora's body trembled when he heard that. Upon seeing his dark face, a shocked expression - though maybe he was mistaken - instantly flashed over Suzuka's face. Her lips trembled, hesitating as she decided whether to advance or retreat. A brief yet intense struggle assaulted the girl. In the end, she finally couldn't hold back but call out: "Wh, What about you?"

"Wh, What does that mean?"

"You don't hate me?"

"Hate you? Why....."

"Idiot! Of course the shikigami from back then, the one that I killed!" Suzuka's face teared up and her emotions burst forth as she tried to conceal her tears with anger. "I destroyed your shikigami and you yelled at me to shut up and stared at me so fiercely, how can you deny it!"

Harutora was speechless, and at the same time, he spurred himself on forcefully in his heart.

This moment had finally arrived.

Unrelated to Natsume's true identity, and meaningless towards gains or losses.

If he planned on continuing to interact with this girl Dairenji Suzuka, right now was the crucial moment. He definitely couldn't mess up.

He didn't need to lie. It would be enough to bring out his truthful self and reply sincerely.

Harutora smiled slightly.

"You're really an idiot." Right, he needed the truth right now. "Don't worry, you were the one who won't ever be able to see your brother again because of us. As the one who wasn't able to reach out to her, I'm the only one who needs to worry about Hokuto's matter. You don't need to hold it to yourself."

Suddenly, a teardrop finally fell from Suzuka's eyes. Harutora felt a strong shock, incredibly ashamed of himself.

Harutora had never noticed nor expected that she would be concerned this much about Hokuto. How exactly had he seen Suzuka? He always paid attention to the

false appearances of the Divine General brat with a twisted personality, and as a result, hadn't he been the one to overlook her true side?

She was so alone, she didn't even have anyone to open her heart towards.

Once she noticed she was crying, Suzuka hastily wiped away her tears. Harutora didn't open his mouth, his entire body frozen and immobile.

After she wiped her tears, Suzuka looked straight at Harutora again, her moist, round eyes reflecting Harutora's figure. "......I......I, I......" Her words half-spoken, they refused to come out as if stuck inside her chest. She went silent, seemingly unable to get a hold of her complex and enormous emotions. For some reason, that appearance looked like the quite crucial situation of a child desperately reaching out her hand for help.

"It's alright." Harutora took the initiative and spoke, more or less placating the girl's emotions. Then, he thought of something important.

"Ah, right. Sorry, you don't need to burden yourself with Hokuto's matter, because she isn't actually dead."

After hearing Harutora's confession, Suzuka's expression changed, taking some time to understand that remark.

"......What does that mean?"

"Uh, she..... though she was a shikigami, she wasn't exactly the same as a normal shikigami. It's hard to explain, but she didn't actually have her own will, and was controlled by some other practitioner--"

"......L, Long-distance control? Sh, She was a simple shikigami?"

"Right, that's it. Anyways, that shikigami was made pretty sophisticatedly..... So even you didn't see through it immediately. But that Hokuto - that shikigami Hokuto

was at best just a 'container', and the true Hokuto - the person who talked and laughed with me - should still be living somewhere in the world."

"....."

Suzuka was speechless upon hearing Harutora's explanation. She attentively listened to every word Harutora said and stared intently at his face, her expression as if she had suffered an intense shock.

Harutora continued to speak:

"Honestly, that was what made me decide to enter this world..... There were many reasons why I made this decision, but the majority of it was because I thought maybe I could meet Hokuto's controller again. That person's definitely an Onmyouji, so if I become an Onmyouji, we might be able to meet some day."

Harutora told Suzuka the dream that he had never confessed to Natsume and Touji, wholeheartedly only wanting to slightly lessen Suzuka's remorse. If Suzuka cared about Hokuto, maybe knowing this matter could let her unburden her heart.

However.....

After hearing Harutora's explanation, Suzuka's body trembled and then stiffened. "......What kind of joke is that." The tone leaking out of her mouth was stilted, overturning Harutora's predictions. Then, the gaze that Suzuka looked at Harutora with was no longer clear and simple. The corners of her mouth curled, suddenly forming a savage smile, self-deprecation rapidly emerging on her face.

"Damn." She cursed.

...Huh? What was going on?

Harutora's heart leaped, not understanding why Suzuka's mood had suddenly changed so much. Upon seeing Harutora's reaction, Suzuka's mouth drew back even more. A smile like fresh blood dripping from a wound emerged on her face.

"......Whatever, this is so annoying. Anyway, I didn't need that kind of thing in the first place, so it's enough if I'm satisfied....." Suzuka spoke to herself, her voice giving off an appalling force. An electric chill ran through Harutora's back when he heard it.

"Wh, What are you saying?"

Harutora almost reflexively called out Kon, simultaneously regretting his orders at the beginning when he had commanded her not to appear no matter what happened.

Suzuka caught Harutora with her gaze, suddenly leaning her body forward. "......I.....I'll rely on my own strength and get a 'new self'....." She held on to a will that seemed like it could crumble anytime as she stared pressingly at him. The fire of 'determination' burned in her gaze, the flames of a 'decision' that she would chase 'something' without fear of being hurt.

Right as her voice faded, her look suddenly shifted into a battle state. She clicked her tongue fiercely, overturning the chair as she stood up, casting a gaze behind her that was sharp as a knife.

"Damn! There really was someone watching!"

"What?"

"You! Your stealth is too simple!"

Suzuka barked, quickly forming a blade seal and slashing her hand seal behind her - towards the table on the other side of the partition.

The magical energy cleaved through the air, still eye-catching even though it had been sealed, and exploded in midair.

In the next second, as he 'saw' an intense flash of light, a figure appeared and leaned out of the shadows towards them from a place that had been originally empty - no, a place that he had not noticed a presence from at all.

A dark Onmyou Academy uniform.

Jet-black hair tied with a pink ribbon.

"Aah!"

With her magic broken, that person tumbled to the ground from her chair. There was a pair of unbefitting simple glasses on the face that looked up at Harutora and Suzuka with trepidation.....

".....Ah?"

Harutora's body went limp, momentarily forgetting his shock and fretfulness. His entire body went slack as if the vital force and mental force in his body had disappeared in a second.

Suzuka also stared blankly at that person.

That person's face was red, her body frozen.

Harutora was careless for a moment. ".....Natsume, why are you....." Once the words left his mouth, he realized he had gaffed, but unfortunately it was too late. It was over. Harutora looked at Suzuka.

Then--

Who was this person - she didn't need to think much, Suzuka already realized. Everything happened instantaneously like a spark triggering a chain reaction.

I remember this person.

I always had that face in my heart and couldn't forget it, since after all she was one of the people who obstructed my plans. I was even more concerned after that incident happened, because she was the girl by Harutora's side.

The girl from that day who wore miko clothing, accompanying Harutora by his side. And also--

"......Natsume, why are you....."

Simply put - though Suzuka wasn't clear on the reasons why she was dressed as a male for some reason - with this, she could understand why she had been there back then, her magic unbefitting her age, and her reason for stopping Suzuka together with Harutora.

Tsuchimikado Natsume.

This girl was the miko from back then.

The encounters with Harutora immediately appeared in her mind. Every time Tsuchimikado Natsume was brought up, his attitude would become strange. In other words, this was a secret that couldn't be told to others. Tsuchimikado was the main family 'son' to outsiders, but this was actually a lie concealing her true identity.

Not only this.

...'The true Hokuto'...

"......Right."

High-level techniques that could even conceal her from Suzuka.

A reason for always being with Harutora.

...'She's still somewhere.'

"......So that's it."

Just then, a burning anger that even she couldn't help but be surprised about controlled Suzuka's mind, and a cruel personality - one that even she herself feared - broke its shackles.

A smile emerged on her mouth, her tangled emotions making her sneer leisurely.

She looked at Harutora, looking at his pale face and dumbstruck appearance, and her eyes moistened again.

This time, she made absolutely sure not to cry again.

"Now..... things are becoming more and more 'interesting'."

That's right, she definitely couldn't cry again.

After the disaster happened, the hollow sound of a ringtone emanated in the fast food store.

The ringtone came from Harutora's phone.

'Sorry, Natsume might have gone to find you.'

When Touji's message arrived, things had already progressed to the point of no return.

Part 4

"Hi, darling! Good morning!"

The next morning, Harutora, who suffered Suzuka's assault, had a dull gaze. Natsume, who sat next to him, had the same half-dead appearance. Among them, only Touji was leisurely, casting an 'it's finally here' gaze at Suzuka.

A bestial smile flashed across Suzuka's lips, a killer light flashing in her eyes. She walked leisurely towards Harutora's seat in the classroom that had erupted into a clamor because of the word 'darling'.

"Oh? You don't look too energetic today, did something happen? I can give some of my energy to senpai~"

Suzuka played around with Harutora. Harutora was powerless to fight back with his weakness already in the girl's hands.

Then, Suzuka deliberately turned her gaze to Harutora's side.

"Ah! 'Could you be' Natsume-senpai? Tsuchimikado Natsume-senpai, the Tsuchimikado family's next heir. 'Nice to meet you'! I'm Dairenji Suzuka, I heard rumors about Natsume-senpai often in the Onmyou Agency~"

"....."

"I'm really moved, I 'always' really wanted to 'meet you'."

Natsume - no longer wearing glasses on her face - didn't say a word, nodding her head a few times mechanically. Harutora looked at Natsume next to him with an ashen feeling.

"I’m not used to living in the Onmyou Academy, so please 'look over me', 'senpai'." Suzuka spoke, a sweet smile all over her face.

".....Oh man, this isn't good." Touji muttered.

That simple sentence happened to be a concise and accurate evaluation of Harutora and Natsume's new term.

Short - Chicks In The Nest Prologue

Touji later explained his reason for assigning Harutora to deal with Suzuka at the start - the so-called 'repairing the house before the rain'. He had prepared in advance for fear that the truth would be exposed.

"I said it many times, right? There's only one crucial factor to the problem this time, which is whether Dairenji remembers Natsume's appearance or not. If she doesn't remember..... We just need to reduce the opportunities where the two of them meet as much as possible, and then dressing like a male as always won't be a problem. But, if she remembers Natsume's appearance, the male facade will be exposed sooner or later and there's nothing we can do about it. In that case, the important action this time is what safeguards we take 'after the exposure'."

At the time, Suzuka had already clearly expressed interest in Natsume. With that, stopping Suzuka and Natsume from coming in contact would be incredibly difficult. Even if they stalled for time, it would just be delaying the inevitable.

The main family's 'tradition' - the Tsuchimikado family successor had to act as a male towards outsiders. Bound by the rules of this 'tradition', Natsume was disguised as a male and had entered the Onmyou Academy to study with a male identity. But, there were people like Touji who had long since known inside information, exceptions who broke the 'tradition'. Even if the tradition was clearly defined, actually strictly complying with it in real life indeed had its difficulties.

Hence, if things became helplessly exposed, it was important to ensure that this fact wouldn't be spread around arbitrarily. In other words, they had to make perfect precautions beforehand to prevent Suzuka from spreading this matter.

"In the end, it's hard to say if this is a success or not."

After noticing Natsume's true identity, Suzuka indeed had not spread the truth, but Harutora believed that this outcome didn't count as a success and was simply a downright disaster instead. After grasping Harutora and Natsume's weak point, Suzuka had revealed her nature, not just an arrogant attitude, and had completely turned Harutora and the others into her own servants.

One week had passed quickly after Natsume's true identity had been exposed. Simply put, this week had been a living hell.

After school let out that day, Suzuka had called out Harutora and Natsume like usual. She had asked them where they usually met, and after moving to the emergency stairwell where Harutora and others had often gathered before, she instructed the two to kneel in the stairwell side by side, while she had sat on the stairs, looking down on the two 'senpai' to her heart's content.

"You should know your own positions, right?" She proudly declared. Harutora and Natsume's faces shuddered when they heard that.

It was truly a nightmare. They had been stunned to meet Suzuka again, but who would have expected that this reencounter would bring about such a tragic situation.

Kon's regretful moans were faintly audible, and Harutora could only warn her to suppress her temper as much as possible. He was grateful inside for his shikigami's feelings, but he didn't want to make things even more convoluted. That was the situation he wanted to see the least right now.

"Alright, what should we do today." Suzuka looked down at them with a cold gaze, asking leisurely. "Darling, do you know about any interesting topics?"

Since the matter had been exposed, 'Darling' had become Harutora's nickname. Harutora thought that this was to annoy him - he didn't notice that it was actually to make Natsume mad.

"Uh....." After worrying for a long time, he said: "There's nothing interesting."

"You useless person! Darling, you're really no use at all!"

First an unreasonable demand, then becoming angry after hearing the answer. This person's personality was really incredibly bad.

Why exactly had things ended up like this? Harutora felt unusually nostalgic about looking up at the cherry blossoms, full of confidence and expectation, while walking on the road to the academy one week ago. He was almost unable to return from his thinking.

"And Natsume-chi? Do you have any interesting topics?"

"....No."

"What the hell, there's no saving you, useless Tsuchimikado family."

"....."

Natsume couldn't exert herself even if she was remorseful, her shoulders drooping listlessly.

"Ahh, damn." Harutora couldn't help but rise. "I can't take it! I really can't take it!"

"H-Harutora-kun!"

"What is it Darling, you're not afraid of what defying me will lead to?"

"I don't care! I can't tolerate this any more! Who cares what will happen!"

".....Hmph, impatient guy....."

"H-Harutora-kun, no! Please calm down!"

"I, I can't. Natsume, don't stop me. I'll take responsibility, but I won't be able to cool off until I hit her a few times!"

"Calm down, I'm begging you!"

Natsume pulled Harutora, and the impulse that had nowhere to be vented made Harutora's body inadvertently shake.

Suzuka coolly watched his actions. Once she saw Natsume tightly holding on to Harutora, she frowned unconsciously to replace her original mocking smile.

"......Ah, whatever, this is so annoying." She cursed impatiently. "Then..... Right, Darling, I remember that you were an outsider before transferring into the Onmyou Academy, right? Did anything interesting happen after transferring?"

"I, Interesting?"

"Right, there should be at least one or two interesting things."

Suzuka raised her legs, propping her face on her palm and staring at Harutora and Natsume. The two of them looked at each other, thinking of the events that had happened in this past year. Then, their gazes crossed, quickly reaching a conclusion.

"......There's nothing interesting."

"Let me hear about it."

"Didn't I just say? There's nothing interesting!"

"It's alright, I just want to hear." Suzuka grinned like a cat playing with a mouse, as if she had seen through his thoughts.

Exactly how much shame would he have to endure in the future? Harutora's heart sank and Natsume was completely despaired as they endured this incomparable humiliation.

It was after school let out and the day's classes had already ended. No matter how ardently they hoped, the bell sounding the start of class would never ring to save the two from this hell.

Story 1 - Frog Day

Mentioning this great person was inevitable when discussing the history of Japanese magic.

Onmyouji Abe no Seimei.

Driving back the Hyakki Yagyou during the Heian period, purifying demons, the exceptional practitioner that had spirits serve him.

After his death, his offspring called themselves the 'Tsuchimikado', looming over the magic community as the foremost Onmyoudou family for several hundred years, until a genius emerged among his progeny, bringing huge innovation to magic - along with devastating calamity.

"...My report ends here."

A deep, bright voice. Once Tsuchimikado Natsume closed her mouth, praising sighs immediately drifted around the classroom.

This was the premier national Onmyouji cultivation facility, the Onmyou Academy. Students whose goals were to become Onmyouji sat in the big classroom, and every one wore the uniquely designed uniform similar to Heian-era imperial clothing.

The males wore black-colored uniforms, while the females' uniforms were pure white. Natsume, who had risen to give a report, also wore a black uniform.

Her body was small and slim and her good looks were androgynous, her waist-length black hair tied up with a pink ribbon. However, her standing posture was even more imposing than a vast majority of the male students, and her appearance gave off an immutable intellectuality and self-confidence. All of the students perked their ears up and listened seriously to her report, and there were quite a few female students who cast enthusiastic gazes in her direction.

"Very good." The homeroom teacher Ohtomo stood on the podium, nodding his head in satisfaction. "Full score. You almost don't need to take classes."

"...That's not true."

"Don't be that modest, no wonder you're the progeny of the famous Tsuchimikado family." Ohtomo smiled cheerfully at the reticent Natsume. This teacher was young but he seemed very old for his age, since there was a fake leg fixed to his right foot and he held a short cane in his hand.

"Alright--" Ohtomo still beamed. "Natsume-kun, sorry, could I bother you to help wake up that happily sleeping other Tsuchimikado-kun next to you?"

"What?" Right when Natsume asked back, she heard the faint, sound of snoring from next to her. The one snoring was a male student, his entire body leaning on his chair, his head up and his mouth half-open. That appearance was completely unimposing, but just as Ohtomo said, he looked quite happy.

Snickers arose from everywhere in the classroom. Natsume's face reddened and she hastily knocked on the male student's head.

"Ugh! ...It hurts, Natsume. What are you hitting me fo..... Ah."

Halfway through speaking, he looked around and finally realized the situation. The sound of laughter didn't stop in the classroom, and Natsume's face flushed even more from embarrassment.

"Good morning, Tsuchimikado Harutora-kun, did you have a good dream?" Ohtomo spoke with a grin.

"Uh, S, Sensei..... Good morning....."

"Good - Ahh, Natsume-kun, you can sit, we'll have Harutora-kun stand up now."

Natsume furrowed her brow, expressionlessly sitting back on her seat. Then, Harutora stood up with an awkward face.

"How regrettable, Tsuchimikado. Truly unfortunate, Tsuchimikado." Ohtomo lamented deliberately, and Harutora's face sank when he heard this.

"......Please don't say any more, the peak time of the Tsuchimikado family passed a long time ago."

"That's not true~ The Tsuchimikado family is an extremely famous family right now."

"But it's a declining family. What do you mean, fame? Those kinds of thoughts will just make me troubled."

"I see, especially because you were an ordinary high school student not long ago."

"Doesn't that make sense? I just entered this realm, so expecting me to perform well will just trouble me, just increasing my burden."

"Uh huh, you mean even though as a member of Tsuchimikado family, you could still carelessly doze off during class."

"Oh, you understand me?"

"I'm very clear. Anyway, why don't you stand up during class."

Laughs sounded throughout the classroom again. Harutora scratched his head helplessly, and the neighboring Natsume lowered her head, her shoulders shaking inadvertently.

"Actually, dozing off during class has nothing to do with where you were born. It's a problem of attention, your attention is insufficient."

"Ah, how cunning. Sensei was the one who mentioned the Tsuchimikado in the beginning! Also, I haven't been exposed to this field for very long, so I'm a bit disadvantageous, so sleeping during a class that I'm not familiar with is--"

"Harutora-kun."

"Yes."

"We're in history class right now, not magic."

"......Really?"

Ohtomo grinned.

"I got it, why don't you stand on one foot during class."

Spiritual disasters - There were often spiritual disasters happening centered at Tokyo. Their origins came from the final phase of World War Two when Japan was nearing certain defeat.

During the war, the Onmyou Bureau had reestablished at the request of the military, changing its name to the Onmyou Agency at the end of the war, and dealing with the spreading spiritual disasters using the newly constructed 'General Onmyoudou' system of magic. At the same time, they formulated Onmyoudou, actively regulating magic and related laws as well as applying strict guidelines. They used a qualification system for magic-users, cultivating and promoting new talent to create

the professional practitioners of modern society. With this, the ravens soaring in the dark sky of Tokyo were born.

"This is an insult!" Natsume resented the injustice, waving her fist and scolding loudly. "Acting like that is degrading the Tsuchimikado family's fame. Listen, Harutora. You transferred into the Onmyou Academy half a year late, so you should be working harder than the other students, not sleeping during class! And what kind of bad excuse did you think up? Can you even consider yourself a Tsuchimikado family member like that?"

"......Ugh."

Natsume's face flushed red with anger, and Harutora, who had stood on one foot for the entire class, was stiff-faced from exhaustion.

The morning class had ended and it was currently lunchtime. Harutora and the others weren't in the classroom, but rather the emergency stairwell in the back of the academy building instead.

When Natsume, who was concerned about outside perceptions, wanted to scold Harutora, she would usually bring him here. Because she had to look up at him if they were standing, she made Harutora sit on the stairs, constantly griping about him.

Even if Harutora and Natsume were both first-year Onmyou Academy students and even if they were both born to the Tsuchimikado family, the positions of the two were greatly different.

Harutora had been born in the Tsuchimikado branch family, and he didn't have the spirit-seeing ability, nor could he sense aura. Before this summer, he had studied at a normal high school, passing a mundane high school life. Of course, he had almost no specialized knowledge related to Onmyoudou, and he accepted himself as a dunce among the Onmyou Academy, which was a gathering of national elites.

On the other hand, Natsume had been born to the famous Tsuchimikado main family, showing excellent ability since she had been small and receiving various trainings. She had already been chosen as the Tsuchimikado family's next heir, and her grades at the Onmyou Academy were also outstanding. She was an amazing genius not only to the students, but also in the eyes of the teachers.

It was because of this that her blood-related childhood friend being behind made her unusually annoyed.

"What's more, this is all because you're too lax. Onmyoudou is competitive, so you'll be left behind quickly if you still think you're a normal high school student!"

"......I was left way behind a long time ago, and also my high school grades were never passing either."

"Even more of a reason why you can't lose in momentum! Since you're incurably stupid, at least be up front about it!"

"......Are you encouraging me, or insulting me?"

Natsume's tone was indignant, loudly haranguing the troubled Harutora. Her callous attitude in the classroom was like a deliberate act, as she was actually extremely shy and introverted.

"......But, Natsume, you don't have to be that mad, right? I'm the one who has to stand up in shame when Sensei gets mad, right?" Harutora spoke tiredly.

Natsume's eyes narrowed as soon as she heard that. "I know what you want to say." Harutora immediately and hastily reached his hand out to hold back her words. "Anyway, it's the same old 'as a Tsuchimikado family member', right? But, it's no use to bring out past fame to pressure people now."

"Could it be that you plan on giving up?"

"Look at reality. Normal people don't even know the name 'Tsuchimikado', and your strict attitude just increases my troubles." Harutora resisted tenaciously.

Actually, though Abe no Seimei was widely renowned, very few normal people knew of the existence of his descendants, the Tsuchimikado family. Even if they had been a prominent Onmyoudou family in the past, this name was only spotlighted inside the 'industry'.

However, Natsume showed a cold gaze, staring at Harutora.

"......Even so, everyone here thinks that 'Harutora is being stupid again, what a Tsuchimikado - pff'."

"Let them laugh if they want! Anyway, that's also a fact!"

"Don't say such shameful things so straightforwardly! Don't you feel embarrassed?"

"Didn't I say just now! It has nothing to do with you!"

When Harutora retorted with this, Natsume's face suddenly went dark, speaking with a firm tone. "No, of course it's related. You're my shikigami, so even if I put the Tsuchimikado family to the side, my troubles will increase if you don't work hard, considering my own reputation. No, you have to work hard!" After saying that, Natsume puffed out her chest proudly, her childish attitude making Harutora show a worried expression and look up at his master.

Shikigami.

In other words, the 'familiars' controlled by Onmyouji, originally referring to a spiritual existence but in a broad sense it means a type of magic, referring to all 'individual that serves' Onmyouji.

The Tsuchimikado family tradition put forth that the branch family had to become a shikigami to serve the main family. Harutora had complied with the family tradition, becoming Natsume's shikigami.

"The master has the duty to teach the shikigami! I have a duty to make Harutora into an Onmyouji that can stand alone!"

"......So annoying....."

Harutora rested his hand on his knee, putting his chin in his palm. Underneath the fingers over his chin - under Harutora's left eye - was a pentagram that seemed like a tattoo, the Tsuchimikado family's 'star mark' family crest. It was the mark branded on Harutora when he had become Natsume's shikigami.

"Anyway, I forbid you from continuing to shame yourself! Get serious! Understood?"

"Y, Yes....."

Once Natsume spoke about 'master and shikigami', continuing to debate was just a waste of breath. Harutora could only reply honestly because of his past lessons.

"Haah, I miss my normal high school life."

Harutora muttered a complaint to voice his annoyance and then sighed, looking up at the ceiling.

This summer, Harutora had left his normal high school, coming to Tokyo and transferring into the Onmyou Academy. Though he had been affected by many factors, it had been a giant, sudden change after all, and hence even if he had

gradually become used to the academy life, he still often doubted his current situation, unable to believe that it was reality.

What's more, he hadn't contacted his past high school classmates for a long time now. What were they doing right now? Were they still living the same unchanging life after he left.....

Just then, "......Huh?" Her wordless gaze caught Harutora's attention and he turned towards Natsume again. Natsume's momentum from earlier was no longer visible, and her expression seemed unusually weak.

"Wh, What's wrong?" Harutora was taken aback, hastily asking. Natsume replied faintly: "No, it's nothing.....", restlessly lowering her head. Then, she looked up at Harutora.

"......Do you still like your school from before more?"

"Huh?"

"......Do you regret becoming my shikigami, did you not want to enter this place?"

Natsume gingerly observed Harutora's reaction. She pretended to be calm on the outside, but her expression and words gave away her anxiety.

Harutora didn't know how to respond for a while.

Just then, "So you really were here." A deep voice came from the top of the emergency stairwell, making the two of them panic for a moment.

The one who appeared in the top of the emergency stairwell was a boy with a cold, sharp expression. He wore his black uniform untidily, using a bandanna to tie up his hair. His body was slim and his casual dress quite fit his personal style.

That person was their classmate, Ato Touji.

"Is the lecture time over....." Touji sized up the pair's appearance, noticing that a strange, tense atmosphere floated in midair and raising one eyebrow. "".....Oh."

"What is it, Touji? Do you need something?"

"It's nothing, I'll talk about it later."

"Wait, go ahead, that attitude is a bit unnatural! Say it if you need something, we're already done talking!" Harutora frantically called out to stop Touji. Touji smiled shallowly, slowly stopping his feet.

Touji was Harutora's classmate from when he was still studying in a normal high school. He was the same as Harutora, transferring into the Onmyou Academy with the identity of a normal person. He and Harutora had been buddies since high school - actually, they were something closer to comrades. Hence, he also had a close relationship with Natsume.

"Wh, What is it, Touji?" Natsume also asked with a bit of hesitation.

Touji asked casually after hearing that: "Natsume, was today's lecture the same as always, teaching Harutora about how to be a shikigami?"

"I, I guess so."

"That's perfect. Harutora, now it's your turn to lecture."

After hearing Touji's hinting remark, Natsume furrowed her eyebrows and Harutora was stunned. But, Harutora quickly guessed what was going on, momentarily becoming apprehensive.

"Kon? Are you still here?"

He looked left and right, calling out to his surroundings. However, no matter how he called out, no one responded. Natsume was shocked by the change in situation, looking up at Touji in dismay.

"......Could it be that Kon got into some trouble?"

"The homeroom teacher called for Harutora. He wants you to do something about that loyal shikigami." Touji grinned as he spoke.

☆

The loyal shikigami was caught in a net, struggling to try to free herself in the center of the faculty office. Once she saw Harutora's dejected face, her bright blue eyes immediately widened, her porcelain-like white skin flushing red from shame. "H-H-H, Harutora-sama.....!"

This shikigami was a small girl, and she was even a young girl who might be younger than an elementary schooler - she was actually a little girl. With her lustrous, neat, short hair and the suikan and hakama that she wore, her outer appearance looked extremely like that of a Japanese doll. In addition, there was a pair of randomly twitching animal ears on her head, with a leaf-shaped fluffy tail growing out of her waist. In addition, she brandished a wakizashi in her hand, so anyone could see that she wasn't an ordinary girl at first glance.

She wasn't a human, but a true shikigami - those words weren't a figure of speech, as she was a true shikigami as a spirit, Harutora's defensive shikigami, Kon.

"......What are you doing..... Uh, oh god, I can probably imagine....."

Kon shrank her body, kneeling inside the net.

His homeroom teacher Ohtomo frowned behind the girl, sitting on a chair. He had a towel on his head and the shoulders of his suit were drenched. On the table was a large, visibly cracked cup of tea.

"This little one took advantage of when I was drinking tea to attack. This is the first time I was assaulted by a student while resting in the office." Ohtomo spoke aggravatedly.

"......Sorry....."

Harutora apologized prudently, casting an overwhelmed gaze at Kon.

"Really..... Did you go try to take 'revenge' by yourself again?"

"I, I should be put to death--"

"Since you're sorry for it, why don't you change those reckless actions."

"Yes, I was very close to--"

"Don't get the important point wrong!"

Harutora narrowed his eyes and Kon's ears drooped listlessly like a dog that had been kicked away.

Kon had originally been a fox spirit, a shikigami serving the Tsuchimikado branch family. Because Harutora was her current master, she offered him her loyalty like a faithful dog to its master.

The problem was that she often caused quite a few incidents because of her excessive loyalty. She had only come to take revenge this time because Ohtomo had shamed Harutora in the classroom.

"How many times have I told you, you can't be reckless in school. Also, even though you're thinking of me, every time you act impulsively it ends up making even more trouble."

"......I-I, I had no such intention....."

"Even if you didn't mean to, the end result is the same. H, Hurry up and apologize to sensei."

"......Forgive me....."

Kon didn't continue resisting when Harutora scolded her, obediently apologizing politely towards Ohtomo. The courage that she had assaulted the teacher's office with vanished without a trace once she encountered Harutora, and she even spoke tersely and in a stammer.

Ohtomo sighed.

"Please take care of her, Harutora-kun. If an ordinary person went through this kind of situation it would bring up huge trouble."

"Uh, I'm really very sorry, I'll discipline her properly."

"It's no use just to say that..... Kon-kun's the Tsuchimikado family's personal shikigami, and we can't use magic to deal with her however we want. We can only rely on you to control her actions by tightening the reins." Ohtomo spoke, his expression unusually serious.

Kon belonged to the class of defensive shikigamis. Normally, she was always dematerialized and hiding her body to act as Harutora's guard. But, Harutora could never completely get a hold of her each and every move, often leading to her acting on her own like this.

"But she's very good at stealth. I don't know where she goes as soon as she disappears."

"Hey, she's your shikigami you know. You can't say those irresponsible things."

"Yes....."

Harutora replied helplessly, the gaze that he stared at the shikigami with slightly resentful. Kon kneeled on the ground, her body shrinking smaller and smaller.

Even if they were dematerialized, it should be possible to observe the position of shikigami by using the spirit-seeing ability to 'see' aura. In the end, this could be called the basic ability possessed by all people who wanted to become Onmyouji.

But, Harutora had only obtained the spirit-seeing ability from Natsume this summer, and his senses towards aura were far behind the other classmates in his class.

"Sorry, Sensei, I'll be more careful in the future." Natsume volunteered herself, standing up. But--

"It's no use if you're careful."

"Quiet, Touji."

"......Busybody....."

"Kon! What did you say!"

"....."

Natsume glared at Kon huffily and Kon immediately tossed her head, her big tail waving left and right as if she didn't care.

"See, she doesn't listen to you at all." Touji spoke jokingly.

Natsume was Kon's master's master, but this was Harutora's individual circumstance and she had no direct relationship with Kon. As could be seen by her assaulting a teacher alone, this shikigami was inexplicably arrogant towards people other than Harutora for some reason.

Natsume glared at Kon and Kon turned her head in disdain. Touji happily enjoyed this scene, but Harutora's face was full of helplessness.

Just then, Ohtomo seemed like he suddenly thought up some idea. He grinned, his expression quite strange.

"How about this. I'll let Harutora-kun undergo some training for Kon-kun's sake."

"......So that's why sensei stuck that simple shikigami on your head?"

"Right, he wants me to look after this thing and keep it from escaping." Harutora replied, moving his gaze up irritatedly, but however he tried to look up, he couldn't see it. This had nothing to do with spirit-seeing ability because the 'thing' was sitting on his head.

Ohtomo had put a frog on Harutora's head. Of course, this wasn't a real frog, just something that Ohtomo had made in the interim.

"Harutora-kun is too unskilled at sensing aura. You have to continuously sense a shikigami's aura, and once it moves rashly, order it not to move. It will definitely obey your orders." Ohtomo explained, casually placing the frog on Harutora's head, then added gloatingly: "Once this shikigami gets one meter away from you, you'll be punished. I'll go to the classroom after school to take back the shikigami, so properly watch over it before then, and don't let it escape!"

Hence, Harutora fell into the dilemma of taking class for the entire afternoon with a frog on his head.

"This is pretty light, it doesn't fall off my head no matter how I move..... But it's really annoying."

In addition, even he felt that this scene was ridiculously stupid.

"It suits you, let me take a picture as a memory."

After saying this, his classmate Kurahashi Kyouko laughed and shot a picture of Harutora's disagreeable appearance. She was also the first one who was dumbfounded and brought up the question.

Her combed head of brown hair naturally drooped down. Her eyes were bright, her eyelashes long, and her lips pink. With her sweet, cute appearance and her beautiful, feminine body, no one would doubt it if she were called a model for a fashion magazine.

"Natsume-kun really has it hard too. It's already tiring enough to have an idiot shikigami next to him, and he has to tend his shikigami's out-of-control shikigami too."

Kyouko cast a sympathetic gaze at Natsume. Those words were heartfelt, with no intention of sarcasm, but to Harutora's ears, words without sarcasm were even harder on his ears.

"This time I won't step in to intervene. After all, Harutora can also grow from learning."

"That's awesome, Natsume-kun! And Harutora, stop thinking of yourself as an outsider and respond to Natsume-kun's wishes for once."

"Don't talk about useless things."

Harutora couldn't help but humph in disdain, since her attitude towards Natsume and her attitude towards him were two completely different types - though she was usually like this.

Incidentally, the shikigami's shikigami Kon was currently still kneeling in the faculty office. On one hand, this was to keep her from running around and disturbing Harutora who was currently training, and on the other hand this was to make her properly think about what she had done. For the entire day today, she was not allowed to get near her master. Kon's face was teary and unwilling. Though she was pitiful, this was also her own fault.

"Don't struggle so much, just endure it until school's over."

"......You seem very happy, Touji."

"My life's goal is happiness."

"......What an enviable life."

"Right, if you let this frog escape, what kind of 'punishment' will you get?"

"I don't know, Sensei kept it a secret and refused to say."

"Could it be that you'll stay behind to take after school tutoring? Or is it cleaning? Or could it be a shaved head - Pff!"

"......You seem to be looking forward to it, Kurahashi."

Harutora narrowed his eyes, glaring at Touji and Kyouko.

Just then, Touji suddenly opened his mouth.

"I think it's probably about time to learn what kind of punishment there is."

"Why?" His good friend's words made Harutora ask back in incomprehension, but Natsume's eyes widened instantly. "Harutora! The frog--"

"Huh? .....Ah!"

He frantically felt his head. It was gone, where had that frog gone - just as he hastily searched for aura--

"...Ribbit."

Three desks away, a green frog was croaking loudly. Its distance to Harutora was a bit more than one meter.

Once Harutora noticed, "...Puah!" Water immediately splashed onto his head, drenching his entire face, the freezing water even spraying onto his shoulders. "Th, That damn evil teacher.....!" Harutora muttered a curse, his bangs stuck to his forehead.

About a cup of water suddenly poured from the sky, about as much water as had been poured on Ohtomo.

"...Ribbit."

"So cold!"

"...Ribbit."

"Puah!"

"...Ribbit."

"M-My nose!" 'Cough cough'

Harutora's ordeal didn't end after the afternoon classes started. His upper half was drenched, and his entire uniform was wet.

"......I can't stand this! Step it up, Harutora. Sensei has been staring this way since a while ago." Natsume who sat next to him warned quietly.

"I can't do anything about it. This stupid frog takes the chance to jump around as soon as I look away for a bit."

"It'll be fine if you focus a bit."

"Even if you say that..... Damn, I could do something if only it stayed in a place I could see."

This frog seemed to be an extremely clever shikigami, even harder to catch than Kon. Maybe he was over thinking it, but the frog's croaking sounded more and more like mocking to Harutora's ears. Even if he couldn't see the frog's expression, it seemed like it would cast a contemptuous gaze towards him before it croaked every time.

"You're just imagining it - Hey, Sensei's looking again! Focus on class."

"That's impossible, I can't even focus on dealing with the frog."

The frog's aura was extremely weak, so it was hard to catch even if he focused his entire attention. In addition, though this was to train his spirit-seeing ability, focusing his entire attention on the frog would lead to being unable to focus on class, so this training wouldn't have much meaning.

"......Alright." Natsume spoke quietly. "Since it's a simple shikigami, it should obey practitioners' orders. Harutora, why don't you keep silently chanting 'don't move' to yourself."

"U, Understood. Don't move.....Don't move.....Don't move.....Don't move....."

Harutora immediately listened to Natsume's proposal. Every time he said 'don't move', the frog's body would tremble and stop moving.

Just as Ohtomo had said at the start, the frog would go motionless as soon as he ordered. He even felt as if the frog on his head was clicking its tongue like it was cursing about being caught.

".....Don't move.....Don't move..... - Ohh, It's really not moving! That move is really effective!"

"Harutora, your voice, you're talking out loud!"

Harutora verbally gave orders for it not to move while using his finger to try touching the frog on his head. The frog twisted its body in dislike, but could only faithfully follow orders.

Harutora dropped his eyes, snickering.

"Very good. It looks like lasting until school ends won't be a problem like this."

"That goes against the meaning of the training, but I guess you can focus on class a bit--"

"Hehe, don't move~.....Don't move, don't move..... Stupid frog, stupid frog..... Don't move!"

"Didn't I tell you not to speak out loud!"

As the two of them spoke quietly, "Tsuchimikado!" The teacher's angry roar sounded through the entire classroom. "Yes." The two who both had the same last name stood

up in unison, and faint snickers could be heard in the classroom. The two's faces flushed inadvertently.

The moment both of their faces simultaneously stiffened--

"Pfah!"

"Uwah!"

Water poured on Harutora's - and Natsume's - head, and the amount wasn't just a cup, it was like an entire bucket of water.

"...Ribbit ribbit."

The classroom was dumbfounded and silent as the frog sitting on a distant table croaked happily.

"That was too shameful!"

After school let out, Natsume immediately couldn't hold back her anger, flying out of the classroom.

She had forced herself to endure it during class, but endurance had its limits. Her eyes seemed teary, but he hoped he was only over thinking things.....

"......Honestly, I didn't expect that your aura senses wouldn't just be ordinarily bad." Kyouko shot him a disdainful look, speaking mercilessly.

The desks and even the floor around Harutora were covered in water. Next to Kyouko, the glasses-wearing, pretty-faced male student looked at Harutora with a face of pity.

"It's really a disaster, Harutora-kun. Ohtomo-sensei really gave you a weird training."

"Tch, he's a weird person - don't move - didn't everyone know that a long time ago - don't move."

"But, to think a simple shikigami could do this kind of thing, it must have been made quite skillfully. Could its vessel have been made with water-element charms?"

"Who knows - don't move - anyway, it's definitely a rotten shikigami - don't move."

The male student who talked to him was his classmate Momoe Tenma, with a kind heart and a candid personality. He could be said to be a commendable, honest person among the Onmyou Academy filled with strange people.

Actually, he wasn't the only person in the classroom looking at Harutora. There were also several other students watching the commotion in the distance, and probably quite a few of them were snickering to themselves: "This Tsuchimikado is really stupid - Pff." It was hard to fault Natsume for being unable to endure anymore and hastily running out of the classroom.

"Now I just need to wait for Ohtomo-sensei to take this thing back - don't move - and once this thing turns back into its vessel, I'll definitely put that damned charm in the paper shredder - don't move!" Harutora cursed ferociously, water droplets dripping off his wet bangs.

"You'd better pray that the teacher gets here quickly, that thing looks like it's about to burst."

Touji spoke the truth. The frog that had been prohibited from moving had its cheeks swelled up like it was close to its limits of endurance. Though he couldn't see its expression like this, maybe the frog was swearing to itself that it would get revenge.

"I know..... What is that bastard doing, he's so slow - don't move." As he said this, he stared at the classroom door, and the door just happened to open. Unfortunately, the person entering the room wasn't Ohtomo that he had been waiting for.

"H-H-H, Harutora-sama, I, I apologize for making you wait--!"

"Kon?"

Kon charged into the classroom. The small shikigami leaped and bounded towards her master, sliding and kneeling on the ground.

"I have acted wrongly and brought shame to H-H-Harutora-sama--!"

"Uh, don't worry about it..... But why is it only you who came? What about Ohtomo-sensei?"

"Yes, when the bell sounded, that person said 'Ahh, it's finally over.' and then walked out of the faculty office, his expression happy--"

"Did he come this way?"

"No, he seemed to say he was going to 'pachinko'--"

"Did he forget?"

This was far from good, but this kind of situation was often seen from Ohtomo.

"What's wrong with it, being wet makes you look charming." Kyouko spoke teasingly.

"What are you joking about, how can I go back to the dorm like this - don't move!"

The frog jumped out once it saw there was an opportunity and Harutora hastily commanded it. Kon narrowed her eyes once she saw this, glaring suspiciously at the frog.

"......Please allow me to deal with this shikigami, if H-H-Harutora-sama wishes....."

"What? You can deal with it?"

"Y, Yes..... Assailing enemies is my duty as Harutora-sama's retainer....."

Kon was extremely respectful, a dangerous gleam momentarily flashing in her pair of bright blue eyes. The frog croaked once it saw this, its call sounding full of fear.

"Th, That's great, go ahead, Kon! I allow you to slaughter this damn frog, it would be best if you didn't even leave a corpse - Oh, don't move, stupid frog!"

"A-A-A, As you command.....!"

Harutora immediately ordered without a second thought. Kon nodded when she heard the order, drawing out her beloved blade. Since it had been a long time since she received her order, her young face momentarily radiated light.

The frog called out shrilly, but of course Harutora didn't have any intention of forgiving it.

"Don't move~ Alright, go!"

"...Yes, hah!"

Kon jumped on the table and then leaped upwards again, swinging the wakizashi in her hand with strength.

However, her excessive investment easily led to a backfire. When she leaped off the slippery table, she immediately fell down hard.

"--Iyah!"

She turned a somersault in midair, crashing into the knee of Harutora who sat in his chair. The drawn wakizashi approached him and Harutora couldn't conceal his shock, somehow managing to stop the blade empty-handed, both hands tightly holding to the wakizashi with the tip one centimeter away from piercing between his eyebrows.

"Th, That was close! You almost stabbed me to death!"

"I-I-I-I-I should be put to death."

Kon, whose body was toppled over his knee, was red-faced, her limbs hastily struggling. Every time her tail swung, it happened to hit Harutora's head.

"......A useless master and a shikigami that's no good either."

"......Haha."

Kyouko and Tenma watched the battle from the side. First they were stunned, and only then did they smile wryly. However, Touji's response was different from theirs.

"Kurahashi, Tenma, hurry up and get away from Harutora."

He rapidly moved to the corner of the classroom, saying a warning to the pair who stood still blankly.

The two made 'huh?' sounds simultaneously, and once they turned around, "Ribbit ribbit ribbit!" The frog that had taken the opportunity to escape its magic bindings croaked out loud. At the same time, a large quantity of water gushed forth with Harutora as the center, a flooding torrent like a ruptured swimming pool whose water had all fallen out at once.

"Gah!"

The water instantly engulfed Harutora and Kon, and Kyouko and Tenma by the side - and even the other students watching from afar - were unable to escape.

"Tch! What exactly is going on!"

"S-S, Save me--!"

"Aah! Help!"

"What the hell is this!"

The torrent didn't stop flowing, flooding the classroom instantly and even swirling into a giant whirlpool that drew all of the students in, who bobbed with the waves.

"--Puah!"

Harutora desperately swam out of the surface, and Kon who had swallowed a belly full of water clung to his neck, limp and disoriented.

"Wh, What's going on? What exactly is this!" Harutora grabbed on to a desk fixed into the ground.

"Idiot! You know it's that frog without even having to think about it! Hurry up and think of something!"

"I, Incredible! What kind of magic is this!"

"Tenma, right now isn't the time to admire it!"

With the hairstyle she had carefully set up destroyed, Kyouko struggled in the water, shouting at Harutora and Tenma. Of course, she wasn't the only one raging.

"This is all your fault, right? Harutora!"

"Bastard! Hurry up and think of a way to resolve this!"

"Harutora-kun, I can't believe you!"

"E, Even if you say that, I.....!"

The pouring water had no intent of subsiding, and not long after, it burst through the classroom door and flowed into the corridor.

The screams of other victims outside the classroom arose. Actually, the situation had long since gone past the point of no return.

"Harutora! The frog escaped!" Touji, who had jumped on a desk for shelter one step ahead of everyone, spoke up to warn Harutora. Looking carefully, a green dot was mixed in with the water flowing into the corridor. "Don't move!" Harutora hastily barked, however-- "It's no use, that thing can't hear it!"

Once the frog left the classroom, the water finally began to retreat, but they couldn't leave the frog to run around wherever it pleased.

"Kon! Get up! Go chase it!"

He advanced over water, chasing behind the frog while forcefully pulling Kon and shaking her shoulders.

"Uwah!" The shikigami finally awoke. "F, Forgive me, Harutora-sama. How could I allow you to be troubled with artificial respiration, since..... isn't it a k-k....."

"Does your brain also have water damage? Don't think about nonsense, hurry up and chase the frog!"

"Don't run, Harutora! You think you can escape after causing such huge trouble?"

"I'm not escaping, I'm chasing the frog! Also, this isn't my mistake!"

"Hey, Harutora's running away!"

"Don't run, Harutora!"

"You've got the wrong target!"

Harutora shouted behind him. Just then, the magically created torrent ferociously counterattacked, rushing forth while ignoring gravity and catching Harutora, hauling him into the torrent. Kon managed to jump into midair, evading disaster, but Harutora didn't resist in time at all.

"H, H-H, Harutora-sama!"

"Gah.....!"

Damn, Harutora thought, he was submerged in the water again.

After the torrent dragged Harutora in, it accelerated again. Though the directions of the flows couldn't be predicted, the entire group seemed to be moving with gravity, or in other words, it was very likely that this torrent would flow into - the room underneath!

".....Hah."

Natsume had finally calmed down after taking a hot shower and drying her long hair with a hairdryer.

There was a magic practice field underneath the academy building, a floor that was dedicated to the use of magical technique practical training. There were several shower stalls inside it, which could be used to wash away sweat, as well as a changing room where clothes could be changed.

Fortunately, there was no one in this place using these facilities. Natsume walked out of the shower stall with a towel wrapped around her, returning to the changing room.

She silently blew herself dry for a long time, getting madder and madder.

Why had she ended up in this kind of tragic situation? Why was that childhood friend always so lax and carefree? Couldn't he be a bit serious and show some mettle for facing magic properly? She could give him quite a few suggestions about that.

When her thoughts reached that point, the anger in her heart turned into sighs, the sighs turned into a worrisome, melancholy lamentation.

The scene from noon passed through her mind.

Harutora originally hadn't intended to be an Onmyouji. He had only transferred into the Onmyou Academy because several things happened, joining her who had been set on becoming an Onmyouji since birth, and whose thinking and even lifestyle were vastly different.

When Harutora had decided to become her shikigami, Natsume had almost cried in joy. But, he had said words like 'that nostalgic ordinary high school life'.

"......Harutora, you idiot....." She muttered her complaints.

Just then, sound came from the outside of the changing room.

The sound of water? And..... screams?

She remembered that she was only wrapped in a towel and hurriedly reached her hand towards her uniform, but unfortunately she wasn't able to put her clothes on in time. The sound of water became roaring thunder, ferociously bursting through the entrance to the changing room.

Harutora thrashed in the water, advancing with the flow. He sped through the

corridor, dropping through the stairwell, his body hitting the wall and bounding off the floor. The water choked his nose, filling his mouth. Then, a strong force violently pushed him from behind and he forcefully crashed into a door, the water pressure simultaneously crushing the door. Harutora's body rushed through the opened doorway along with the torrent.

Once he rushed in--

"Order!"

Magical energy burst forth along with a voice, blocking the mighty torrent - along with Harutora inside it - from continuing to advance.

"Gah!"

Harutora was crushed between the magical energy and the torrent, like a fish leaping out of the surface and then dropping heavily back into the water. He was going to die, he was definitely going to die if this went on. He thrashed his arms, kicking his legs, and finally grabbed on to something.

The sensation was soft and not very sturdy, but the drowning Harutora held onto it like he had managed to catch floating driftwood, wrapping his arms right around it--

"Eek!"

"......Huh?"

He did his best to open his eyes, noticing that he was currently on the floor of the changing room. Water was everywhere, the height at about his knees. Most of the water had been stopped at the entrance.

What blocked the water was a charm fixed in midair. Magic. An earth-element charm of the five elements.

Also--

In front of Harutora, he saw Natsume collapsed and lying on the floor with him. Natsume was naked, her dripping wet hair scattered over her dazzling white skin. Her undeveloped, small body depicted healthy and slim curves, and none other than his own two arms were wrapped around her waist.

To make matters worse, his face was even buried in her chest, and a kind of soft, gentle sensation - though it couldn't be called a full feeling - came from his face.

"N, Natsume? Why.....!"

"......!"

Natsume's cheeks flushed red, and then--

"Aaaaaaaaaah!"

She let out a shrill scream.

The magic blocking the torrent immediately showed weakness and the water flowed into the changing room.

"Uwah! Natsume, don't panic! Calm down a bit!"

"Yaah! Aaah!"

The water level immediately rose, and the flow became rapid, swirling into an eddy with a rumble and destroying the lockers on the walls one by one.

"H-Harutora-kun, you beast! Pervert! Go die!"

"I'll die if I let go right now!"

Natsume wailed, violently flinging off Harutora's hands. With the practitioner's mind in disarray, the light that the charm gave off weakened accordingly. If this went on, the two of them would soon be swallowed by the torrent.

...It won't be good if this goes on!

Harutora desperately held on to the agitated Natsume.

"Calm down, Natsume! If this goes on, people might come here soon! It might be teachers or students..... The fact that you're a girl might be exposed at any time, won't that destroy the main family tradition!"

Harutora's remark finally made Natsume come to her senses, making her get a hold of herself.

The branch family that Harutora belonged to obeyed the family tradition of 'becoming shikigami to serve the main family', and Natsume's main family tradition dictated that 'the heir must show himself as a male to outsiders'. Hence, Natsume was pretending to be a male and had entered the Onmyou Academy with the identity of a male student.

"Right, my eyes, I'll close my eyes! Hurry up and think of some way to block this water!"

"Uuuu.....!"

Natsume held back her sobs, raising her head with her tear-filled eyes and staring at the charm in midair.

She had first used the charm to block the water from getting in, but it hadn't completely resolved the problem. The water rose from her waist to her chest, and Natsume moved back, sticking out her index and middle fingers and drawing a seal in midair.

"Eliminate this chaotic water aura with earth! Earth conquers water, or--"

The water had already rushed towards Natsume before she finished reciting the incantation. The water knocked a locker down from the walls, which approached Natsume like a giant tree crashing around in the rapids.

Natsume noticed the danger and froze in place, not knowing what to do.

"...Ugh!"

"Harutora-kun!"

Harutora leaped forward, grabbing Natsume. The locker hit his back, and the force of the collision made him dizzy from pain.

".....Don't worry about me, Natsume, you need to focus.....!"

He spoke a warning, but unfortunately it was too late. Harutora getting hurt had flustered Natsume for a while, and the charm blocking the water collapsed at the same time.

As the torrent burst forth, the changing room momentarily became a sea, engulfing the pair in seconds and hauling them into an eddy.

The two of them bobbed up and down in the water, the water pushing down on them as it poured from all directions. A large amount of bubbles came from Natsume's mouth as the force of the flow continued unabated. Harutora managed to pull Natsume into his arms.

If this went on, the two of them would drown, but they couldn't chant incantations in the water.

...What should I do?

Harutora gritted his teeth. Just then, something flashed before his eyes.

The charm Natsume had just used.

The charm gave off a weak light, the magic not yet completely dissipated.

"...Ugh!"

Harutora forcefully stretched out his arm.

In the realm of Onmyoudou, his power was about as much as an outsider, his spirit-seeing ability was poor, and he was ignorant of magic. However, his spiritual power was exceptionally strong - and definitely didn't lose to Natsume's.

Though he was unable to imitate Natsume and use the same charm magic that she had--

Harutora was also a member of the branch family.

...Now!

He grasped the charm tightly, focusing his spiritual power. His willpower refined his spiritual power and turned it into magical energy, flowing into the charm. In order to compensate for his lack of technique, he raised the magical power, forcibly activating the magic.

"Order!"

Natsume's magic was reborn. The charm gave off a strong radiance, and the flood receded immediately, vanishing like mist.

The light split open the flow, air entering the water and covering Harutora and Natsume. The two of them momentarily lost their buoyancy, tumbling hard onto the ground. Another impact hit Harutora's back, but he never let go of Natsume.

"Ugh..... N, Natsume?"

"......Harutora-kun....."

Natsume was lying on Harutora's body, coughing powerfully a few times while responding to his call. It seemed that she hadn't lost consciousness.

The two of them sprawled out on the floor, catching their disordered breath. The realistic flood in front of them was dematerializing, disappearing like a mirage.

"......Ribbit." A frog fell in front of Harutora and Natsume.

"Ah." The two of them simultaneously exclaimed.

"...Hmph." With a smacking sound, a small hand flattened the frog.

Harutora and Natsume were stunned, too late to react. Kon, who had rushed to the scene, harrumphed, snorting her nose majestically.

"......I, Is it over?"

Harutora murmured in shock, hastily letting go of Natsume. His face was red and he avoided looking at Natsume.

"N, Natsume. Even though the clothes aren't dry yet, you should probably wear them first....."

He stood up and took off his outer jacket, hastily wringing it out and offering it to Natsume. Natsume silently accepted it.

"S, Sorry..... for just now."

"......Don't mention it again."

His childhood friend replied like she was mad and also like she felt that it was helpless. Harutora finally eased up when he heard that she had already gotten a hold of herself.

"Kon, you helped out a lot, well done."

"I, It was nothing..... Things would not have become like this if I had defeated with in one strike in the classroom....."

"That's true, but you saved us in the end..... I thought that I would definitely drown in that flood."

The sound of Natsume putting clothes on came from behind him. Harutora laughed dryly, desperately averting his attention.

The aftermath of the flood was very disastrous.

The torrent had disappeared, but the destroyed entrance and lockers hadn't been restored to their original state. The area looked as if it had been hit by a hurricane, and the fake smile on Harutora's face became stiffer and stiffer.

"Magic is really scary. I really miss my peaceful high school life, haha....." Harutora muttered with a face of helplessness.

When Harutora said this, the movements from behind his back stopped momentarily, and one could hear someone gasp lightly. Of course, that change didn't draw Harutora's attention.

"H-H-Harutora-sama? Do you prefer your past life?" Kon couldn't help but ask, and the presence behind Harutora's back showed tension again.

Harutora smiled lightly.

"It's meaningless to compare those kinds of things. Even if I was affected by my birth and family traditions, I decided myself to enter the Onmyou Academy." He spoke extremely naturally, without hesitation or pretenses. "In the end, this is the road I chose, and I'll keep going no matter how hard it is."

Kon relaxed her breath, and the other person behind Harutora also sighed in relief.

"......Harutora-kun."

Harutora finally turned around when he heard his name being called.

Natsume's head was lowered and her face was red.

Because their sizes were different, Harutora's uniform almost reached to Natsume's knees, but her pair of beautiful legs was visible at a glance. Her glossy hair was dripping wet and her shoulders were huddled together. Harutora's heartbeat suddenly accelerated.

"......Sorry, I said some impolite things before....." Natsume spoke, her voice a whisper.

"Wh, What are you talking about, I, uh, though it was an emergency, uh....."

He hadn't seen his childhood friend show her 'true' side for a long time. In particular, even if she was wearing clothes, he had just seen what she looked like underneath.

Natsume kept her head lowered, but actually Harutora was also the same. He didn't dare raise his head and look carefully at her, and he didn't even notice Kon pouting huffily next to him.

Just as he was thinking of these things--

"Uh..... H, Harutora-kun."

"Wh, What is it?"

".....I, I'll let that matter pass....."

Harutora's face instantly reddened, and Natsume's face flushed further when she saw that.

"Uh, but, it's good!"

".....Huh?"

"I originally thought you would have to bind your chest with something to be able to hide it, b-but it looks like there's no need..... Aha, ahaha....."

With the widespread tense, silent atmosphere, Harutora didn't get what he had just said as he laughed stupidly. The loyal Kon also widened her bright blue eyes in shock, seeming to find it hard to believe that the man in front of her had dared say this.

Natsume stood still in shock for a while, then her shoulders started inadvertently shaking.

"Harutora, you....."

"What?"

"Huge idiot!"

Natsume roared angrily, and a forceful slap resounded in the changing room.

Ohtomo-sensei's wages were garnished for three months.

The next day, Harutora was punished by having to stand on one foot during class for the entire day.

Story 2 - The Men's Capriccio

"......It's done."

Tsuchimikado Natsume murmured quietly in the dark candlelight, a light smile suddenly emerging on her face.

She carefully checked the shikigami standing in front of her again. Some areas were difficult to reproduce perfectly, but they wouldn't be a problem as long as she cleverly hid them. It was more than enough to deal with its intended use.

"......Just you wait....."

Natsume vowed revenge, the smile never once leaving her mouth.

In General Onmyoudou, the synonym of modern magic that was normally called General-Style, practitioners were only allowed to use magic after obtaining qualifications. One had to obtain qualifications based on Onmyoudou guidelines - becoming a 'professional' Onmyouji.

Among the facility cultivating professional Onmyouji, especially the gateway to success - the Onmyou Academy was the most famous. Hence, students from around the entire nation gathered in the Onmyou Academy. The Onmyou Academy had dorms for these students who came from outside, and Tsuchimikado Harutora was currently one student living in the dorms.

"......Hi, morning....."

This morning, Harutora walked downstairs from his second-floor classroom, walking bleary-eyed into the dorm cafeteria. He sat in front of a table carrying a tray with his breakfast. Though he had changed into his uniform, his hair was still messy.

Someone had already sat down before Harutora in the seat next to him. That person was his classmate Ato Touji.

"...Yo." He replied to Harutora, taking a teapot off the table and pouring hot tea into his cup. Different from the slothful Harutora, Touji was bright and refreshing in the morning.

"You look worse than usual today, did you not sleep well?"

"Yeah, it's the fault of that homework, it's way too hard....."

"Homework? Are you talking about the simple shikigami?"

"Right."

Harutora nodded with a bitter face, putting the tofu and seaweed miso soup into his mouth.

Simple shikigami, familiars who served Onmyouji - a type of shikigami. Practitioners infused their magical energy into manufacturable vessels that were named 'cores'. They were the most basic type of shikigami.

Yesterday's homework was related to simple shikigami. The contents of the homework required that the students instructed a paper vessel to move. This counted as basic training in shikigami usage, not much of a difficulty for the level of Onmyou Academy students.

".....That thing just didn't move no matter how much magical energy I put into it. I tried seriously again after getting up in the morning, but it didn't end up working." Harutora muttered in annoyance, chewing a mouthful of marinated fish.

Harutora complained, but in the end he had been born in the Tsuchimikado former Onmyoudou clan. Maybe because he was the progeny of a famous family, his spiritual power, which was the basis of magical energy, was stronger than an ordinary person's. But he wasn't very good at manipulating his spiritual power to convert it into magical energy, and he lacked an understanding of magic theory, leading him to have plenty of horsepower but no way to use it, unable to perform 'magic'.

"......H-H-Harutora-sama. I fear to transgress, but H-Harutora-sama has me as a guard, so I humbly believe that n-no other shikigami are needed....." Kon spoke quietly and cautiously from next to Harutora, evidently tense and anxious.

"You can't mix those two things together. I don't mean to look down on you by doing this." Harutora smiled wryly.

"......Yes....."

An immature voice sounded, but the owner of the voice was nowhere to be seen. The one who had opened her mouth was Harutora's shikigami Kon who was always hiding herself and guarding Harutora by his side. Even knowing that it was homework, she seemed to have a hard time concealing her jealousy upon seeing her master single-mindedly pursuing another shikigami.

"It would be simple if it could move by itself like you. Simple shikigami are so annoying."

"Normally, defensive shikigami need to be used at all times, so they're of a much more difficult level."

Touji replied to Harutora's complaint, and the two of them moved their chopsticks.

Just then, another student appeared in the dorm cafeteria. "...Good morning." Brightness entered the gloomy male cafeteria.

This student had a handsome appearance with a small, lean, and slim body. Bright black hair as beautiful as silk grew to waist-length, and androgynous features were even more prominent in the male dorm.

Tsuchimikado Natsume, Harutora's childhood friend, and the next heir of the famous Tsuchimikado family.

Once Natsume appeared, the gazes in the cafeteria all focused on her. Not only was her appearance outstanding, she was also a genius that everyone in the Onmyou Academy knew about. Unlike Harutora who was behind in his grades, she received quite a bit of attention from everyone. However, she always gave off a serious atmosphere from her and her personality was taciturn, and hence no one dared to approach her. Even inside the dorm, there were almost no students who dared to talk with Natsume.

But.....

"Yo, new arrival, yesterday must have been tough."

"You almost scared me to death when you suddenly screamed out loud."

Several senpai made teasing remarks to her when they saw Natsume. Natsume's face was stiff.

"Actually, Natsume's pretty interesting."

"He just likes to make a fuss."

"No no no, with a group of hungry beasts around, it's no wonder a 'beauty' like him raised his guard."

".....Sorry."

Laughs sounded one after another, and Natsume's body trembled from humiliation, a forced calmness still on her expression.

She took a tray, walking to Harutora and Touji's seats, and greeted them in a bad mood. "......Good morning."

Touji grinned maliciously.

"That's great, Natsume. You instantly blended into the dorm life because of that surprise yesterday."

"......Shut up, mind your own business." Natsume glared at Touji resentfully.

Natsume was stern in front of outsiders, but she was actually just introverted. Once she faced Harutora and Touji, who she was familiar with, not only would her manner of speaking change, but also she would show an unexpected childish side.

"But, this isn't just a joke, Natsume." It was Harutora's turn to speak about his worries. "Pretending to be a guy was already difficult, you really shouldn't have moved into the dorm."

Harutora spoke good-naturedly, but the girl he had played with since he was small frowned immediately upon hearing that.

Unlike Harutora's branch family, the Tsuchimikado main family that Natsume belonged to had 'family tradition' that dictated that 'the heir must show himself as a male to outsiders'. Even if this tradition was outdated, Natsume still strictly adhered to it, entering the Onmyou Academy to study while camouflaging her gender as male.

In addition, after Harutora transferred half a year late into the Onmyou Academy, she had moved into Harutora's dorm, which was the male dorm.

"Didn't you live in a room you rented outside before? Maybe you should move back."

"Bakatora, why do you think I moved to the dorm?'

"Why....."

"I said before, the master and the shikigami can't be separated. Since your only choice was to move into the dorm, I can only cooperate."

Natsume spoke firmly, moving her chopsticks hastily. Harutora and Touji looked at each other helplessly.

Though he wasn't from the main family, the branch family that Harutora was from also had family traditions, one that said that members had to 'become shikigami serving the main family'. Obeying the family tradition was one of the reasons that Harutora, who couldn't be called outstanding, transferred into the Onmyou Academy. There was a pentagram mark under his left eye, the magic seal branded on to him when he had become Natsume's shikigami.

"But life is really inconvenient in some areas when you live in the male dorm, right? Like going to the bathroom and bathing--"

"Th, That's my own problem."

"It's also an important question. Let me ask you, how exactly are you going to resolve it?"

"H, How to resolve it..... I just use stealth magic to eliminate my presence at the necessary time."

"Huh? In that case, you'd see....."

"I, I didn't see! I honestly always closed my eyes! Also, I try to choose a time when no one uses the showers, so I can just bathe quickly." Natsume replied with a blush.

Just then, Touji casually said: "The problem is that you should keep an eye open in the showers." Natsume showed a bitter expression again after hearing him joke about this.

The 'unexpected incident yesterday' that Natsume was being teased about had happened in the showers yesterday evening. The male dormitory building was originally quite old, and only the showers were relatively new. They also had single-person stalls, hence Natsume had only used the showers to bathe since she moved into the dorm.

But yesterday, she had run into other students. She had finished showering, walking out of the stall, and bumped into a swarm of several senpais - of course they weren't wearing clothes - walking in from the changing room.

Fortunately, Natsume had wrapped her body with a towel before walking out of the stall, so her identity wasn't revealed. But..... After suddenly bumping into a big group of completely naked students, she screamed and almost fainted. Shocked, the senpais hastily moved up out of concern, making Natsume even more panicked, and she fled..... In the end, it evolved into a big commotion disturbing all of the dorm's students.

"'This is humiliating' also became 'dis is fumiliading'."

"What? I, I didn't say that!"

"......How shameful....."

"Kon? Kon said that, right! No one wanted your opinion, don't interrupt whenever you want!" Natsume stared fiercely behind Harutora.

Kon was only subservient to her master, and her attitude towards others was inexplicably bad. Harutora couldn't help but sigh, warning her with "Kon, be quiet."

"You should have predicted that these kinds of situations would happen long ago, but instead you were a bit too negligent." Touji shrugged his shoulders like he didn't care about things. "If you panic once you run into a sudden situation, you'd best not

continue to live in the male dorm and move back to your rented room as early as possible."

Harutora also commended Touji's opinion, and though she wasn't visible, Kon was definitely also nodding her head vigorously.

However, before Natsume opened her mouth, a woman who didn't look like a student had already walked up next to the table of Harutora and the others.

"Oh my, please don't move out, Natsume-kun, you just entered the dorm!"

The woman who walked up was about twenty-six or twenty-seven. She had a head of short black hair and wore plastic-rimmed glasses. She gave off a leisurely atmosphere and was basically an agreeable, pretty woman.

She was the male dorm manager, Fujino Mako.

"I heard about yesterday's incident, but you don't need to take it to heart, Natsume-kun. It's not weird at all to feel embarrassed at others seeing you nude, since you're still young after all. It's a natural response, so don't feel bad about it."

"......Uh, no, that....." Natsume spoke in a stammer, her face red.

Honestly, nothing was more embarrassing than being consoled by Fujino like this, but she was extremely dense towards that aspect of things. In her brief dorm life, Natsume had understood this point extremely clearly. In the past, there had been a student who accidentally left his porn CD in the dorm cafeteria, and she had even especially run over to the academy building and asked all of the classrooms to find the student who had forgotten his CD, and returned the CD with a smile in front of the entire class of students. The next day, that student had moved out of the dorm crying.

"......She doesn't seem to have any bad intentions....."

"......Her character's just missing something....."

Harutora and Touji whispered secretly. Of course, Fujino didn't notice, still wearing a carefree smile.

"Don't worry, Natsume-kun. Don't move out of the dorm, I have great expectations for you all."

"Huh? Great expectations? Why?"

"Though you're different types, Natsume-kun and Touji-kun are both pretty boys." Fujino squealed, covering her cheeks with her hands in embarrassment. "That's weird, what about me?" Harutora muttered, but unfortunately no one paid him any heed.

"Natsume-kun and Harutora-kun knew each other since they were small, right? And what's more both were born in the Tsuchimikado family! I originally thought that only Natsume-kun would enter the Onmyou Academy - I didn't think that half a year later, Harutora-kun would also transfer here as well - and not just him, he even entered the academy with his high school classmate Touji-kun! And the two of them are both living in the dorm! Then, Natsume-kun didn't want to get left behind and also moved into the dorm..... Oh my, don't you think that's too amazing and so dreamy? I'm so excited!"

Fujino spoke in a torrent, her gaze moving who knew where. Natsume cast a pleading look towards Harutora, but Harutora didn't get what exactly was 'dreamy'. Touji ate his breakfast silently.

"When I had tea with the female dorm manager before, we talked about it so happily. She was so jealous after she heard what I said, she told me to definitely tell her if there was any new information."

"Wh, What exactly did you talk about.....?"

"Later, she sent me a message telling me that the female dorm students were also very excited after hearing about you guys."

"No way, wh, what are you saying? What exactly are you talking about?"

Natsume couldn't control her tone for a while, affected by an intense spurring of anxiety. Fujino smiled and: "It's fine, it's fine.", evading the questions.

Incidentally, Natsume's room was on the second floor. Harutora's was next to it, and Touji's room was one more room over. Harutora's room was in between the three rooms, and judging by Fujino's words, that kind of arrangement might have resulted from her manipulating something from the shadows.

"Anyway, you can come talk to me anytime if you have any trouble, I'll help you as much as I can." Saying this, Fujino turned around and left. Harutora and Natsume glanced at each other, sighing in unison.

"......She doesn't seem to have any bad intentions....."

"......Her character's just missing something....."

"Whatever, never mind her. On the other hand, there's no way you can live in the male dorm." Harutora turned towards Natsume, continuing to persuade her.

This childhood friend was actually extremely stubborn, though it couldn't be told from her external appearance. Even if she just said something once, it was very hard to change her mind.

However, Natsume's face suddenly loosened, smiling for some reason. "You don't need to worry, I already prepared." She replied deliberately. "Huh? What did you prepare?" Harutora's face became doubtful when he heard this.....

"...I'm heading out first, be careful not to be late to class."

Touji put down the chopsticks from his hand, taking his tray and standing up.

By now, only Harutora and the others were left in the dorm cafeteria. Harutora hastily looked at his watch in shock, noticing that there were only ten minutes until the bell for class would ring.

Harutora and Natsume hastily wolfed down the rest of their breakfast.

After the busy morning, the dorm was quiet and tranquil. Fujino watched the students go, washing the dishes, opening the window to let air flow into the dorm, and dragging a vacuum cleaner around to clean the dorm.

Today was the day to make her routine report, but the time for that was in the evening, so she still had a bit of leisure time after the cleaning finished.

Only Fujino's humming and the sound of the old vacuum cleaner's motor were audible in the silent dorm, but just as she planned on pulling the vacuum cleaner into the cafeteria, she suddenly heard the sound of footsteps from the staircase.

It was the sound of someone going down the stairs. Could someone have overslept? But all of the students in the dorm had gone to the cafeteria and had eaten breakfast today.

The footsteps came down the stairs like they were walking to the entrance. Fujino hurriedly turned off the vacuum cleaner, looking into the corridor from the cafeteria and managing to glimpse the figure of a back disappearing in the other end of the entrance. But she could recognize whose black hair that was at a glance --

".....That's weird?"

"Ahhhh..... I'm so tired!"

After the Onmyou Academy classes ended, Harutora immediately let out a long, powerless moan once he returned to the dorm. He walked to the dorm cafeteria,

sprawling over the table. Touji sat lazily in the seat next to Harutora, and only Natsume stood next to the table, her hands on her hips.

"Hey, you two are too lazy."

"Don't be that bothersome in the dorm..... Today was too exhausting."

"In the end, you expended your entire power just to make a simple shikigami move a little." Touji was like always, teasing the exhausted Harutora.

There had been a surprise test in class today, the contents of which were to use a simple shikigami, the same as from their homework. As could be expected, Harutora had struggled bitterly. "It's such a waste of spiritual power." Even Natsume who had watched from next to him couldn't help but be stunned. Since his spiritual power was uncontrolled, it produced a reaction in the simple shikigami of another student next to him, even making it move.

"In short, this kind of thing happened because Harutora's spiritual power - actually, his grasp of magical energy - isn't accurate enough and he can't fix it in a direction."

".....I know, I know, don't mention the shikigami again."

Harutora lay on the table, pleading resentfully. Natsume let out a long sigh, then immediately grinned. "I'm going back to my room, see you at dinner." After saying this, she left behind Harutora and Touji, leaving the cafeteria ahead of them.

But, one short minute later, the frantic sound of footsteps came from the staircase and Natsume charged back into the cafeteria. "It's gone!" She shouted once she appeared, and Harutora unconsciously raised his head. Touji also frowned lightly.

"What? What's gone?"

"Sh, Shikigami - The vessel of my simple shikigami is gone, it's not in my room!" Natsume was panicked, and Harutora and Touji's expression became more and more puzzled.

"Shikigami? A simple shikigami..... Yesterday's homework?"

"No! It's the simple shikigami that I made myself yesterday! It was there when I left my room this morning, but it was gone when I went back just now!"

"What? Did someone steal it?"

Harutora raised his head, his face solemn.

".....Oh no, this is bad, if someone else sees....." Natsume's spoke with a pale face. She didn't notice that she had returned to her 'original' voice, so it was evident that she had already fallen into a panic.

"What kind of shikigami did you make?" Touji checked.

"Uh, that--" Natsume stammered for some reason upon facing this natural question, and her gaze was evidently evasive.

Just then, "Huh? That's weird? Natsume?" A student who had returned to the dorm from the academy building stopped when he came to the dorm cafeteria, looking at Natsume in surprise.

"Natsume, how are you here?"

"Huh? How am I..... I came back after school ended." Natsume didn't understand.

That student scratched his head after hearing that, his face confused. "Uh..... When I walked out of the academy building just now, I thought I saw you walk in..... But since I came back directly and that person was entering the academy building, it couldn't be you..... I guess I got the wrong person--" Natsume had already bolted before that person finished speaking.

She charged out of the cafeteria with all her power without so much as an explanation, and Harutora and the others were too late to call out to stop her. The student reflexively jumped back after seeing that hideous face and ferocity.

"......Wh, What the hell is she doing?" Harutora was stunned, but Touji looked knowing, saying: "......I know what's going on."

"Huh?"

"Let's hurry back to the academy building, Natsume might be in trouble."

Touji didn't heed Harutora furrowing his brows. He stood up from his chair, showing Harutora a wry smile.

Momoe Tenma, an Onmyou Academy first-year, Harutora's classmate.

He had a small stature and a somewhat slim body, a tacky hairstyle, and wore plain glasses on his face, carrying an immaturity different from Natsume's. His appearance was warm like the sun, and he looked like a sincere person. Actually, his heart was indeed quite good, he was just unusually clumsy.

"That's weird? Where'd my wallet go?" After school ended, he only noticed that his wallet was no longer on him when he was just about to go back home.

His face paled, but he immediately thought of where he might have dropped it. When the simple shikigami skills practice was being held today, he had turned out his pockets because he couldn't find the vessel he had prepared. Maybe he had dropped the wallet back then.

The magic practice field where practical training was carried out was an underground room of the academy building. Tenma hastily ran to the changing room next to the magic practice field while praying that he would be able to find his wallet.

A few days ago, Ohtomo-sensei's shikigami had flooded the changing room, but it had already been repaired like new. Tenma walked into the changing room, immediately walking towards the locker that he had used.

"...Huh? Natsume-kun?"

He had thought no one was here and hadn't expected he would meet Natsume in the changing room. Natsume sat on the bench, blankly staring at the locker in front of him.

"What's up? Didn't you go back with Harutora-kun and the other?"

Since Tenma was a nice guy, he had a pretty good relationship with the just-transferred Harutora and Touji - as well as Natsume who deliberately avoided the other students.

"Ah, could you have forgotten something? How rare." He spoke cheerfully, striding over.

Just then, Natsume suddenly turned around, replying with a stiff attitude: "No."

"No? .....Oh, I see, you didn't forget to bring something back?"

"Yes."

"Then what are you doing here? Could you..... be waiting for someone?"

"No."

"Huh, then self-training in the magic practice field--"

"No."

".....S, So it's not that, huh."

Natsume replied coldly and Tenma couldn't help but feel a bit crestfallen.

Tenma was silent and Natsume listlessly turned his head back towards the locker, blankly staring at it. Those eyes stared at the locker, but they actually seemed like they were looking forward without purpose.

"....."

That appearance wasn't very normal. It was very different from the usual atmosphere.

Tenma worried for a while, not knowing whether to say a bit more or to ignore it. "Ah." Then, he suddenly remembered the reason he had come here.

"Natsume-kun, it seems like my wallet's missing, so did you see it nearby?"

He tried asking, and Natsume replied extremely coldly: "No." That face turned over, but there was no change at all on its expression.

Tenma was helpless because it was too difficult to communicate and could only start looking by himself. Fortunately, Tenma quickly found the wallet. Just like he had expected, the wallet had probably dropped on the floor by accident when he had been searching his pockets.

"Ah, got it! Great, I found it, Natsume-kun."

"Good."

Natsume still replied coldly.

Since he had found the wallet, he should be able to go back home, but Tenma was concerned about Natsume's demeanor, since after all Tenma had quite a good heart.

"Hey, you're being strange, Natsume-kun. Did something happen? If you need someone to talk to--" Tenma asked worriedly, and suddenly noticed that there was something on Natsume's knees.

Athletic clothing.

And a towel.

Once he noticed those things, Tenma finally understood Natsume's reason for coming here..... He couldn't help but be interested. The showers were next to the changing room, and Natsume had indeed just moved in to the dorms a few days earlier. Maybe the dorm showers had broken.....

"What, Natsume-kun, you came here to bathe?"

Once he said those words, Natsume suddenly stood up.

Natsume put the towel and the athletic clothing on the bench, unbuttoning the outer buttons of his uniform, pulling down the zipper and taking off the jacket.

"......Huh? Wait... Natsume-kun?"

Tenma was flustered, but Natsume still continued taking off his clothes.

Natsume unbuttoned the buttons on the shirt under his outer layer one by one. After a glance of the white skin underneath the shirt, Tenma unconsciously turned around, shifting his gaze.

"Wh, What are you doing? Why are you suddenly taking your clothes off? ...Right, this is the changing room, so of course you take your clothes off here, but why so suddenly.....?"

Tenma spoke in a stammer, and the sound of clothing rubbing continued coming from behind him. He didn't get why, but somehow his face was red.

"I, If you came to bathe, of course you need to take your clothes off..... Wh, What am I saying. That's weird, what am I so panicked about, we're both guys! Aha, ahaha.....!"

He chattered, trying to use it to let himself calm down, but the more he spoke the more intense his heartbeat became.

He really wanted to turn around.

His conscience loudly restrained him, not letting him turn around.

But, wasn't this even stranger? They were both guys, so why did his conscience think he couldn't turn around - no, the deeper question was, why did he want to turn around. After all, it was Natsume..... No matter how good-looking he was, he was still a true male.....

"N, Natsume-kun! I'm leaving first--"

Tenma spoke as if he were fleeing. He heard someone open the door to the shower stall behind his back and then close it.

He turned around carefully.

On the bench was placed the neatly folded uniform and the athletic clothing. Tenma's body quickly slackened, and at the same time he tasted the flavor of despair.

".....What's going on with me? Could I be..... no, but, impossible..... but....."

An intense vexation upset Tenma's consciousness, and for some reason, he even felt like he had sinned gravely.

Forget it, he had just been thinking too much - a mistaken moment.

He tried hard to convince himself, his shoulders slumping deeply, and left the changing room.

Kurahashi Kyouko, an Onmyou Academy first-year, Harutora's classmate.

Her brown hair was tied up high and drooped down naturally, with bright eyes and soft lips. Her cute appearance, beautiful body, and internal self-confidence illuminated each other. Her refined expression looked a bit arrogant, and she was actually the eldest daughter of a wealthy family, the famous Kurahashi family in the center of Onmyoudou.

".....Grandma is so carefree." Kyouko left the principal's office, sighing deeply in the corridor.

Unlike the declined Tsuchimikado family, the Kurahashi family could currently be called the family with the most prominent force in the magic community. Kyouko's father was the current head of the Onmyou Agency, and her grandmother Kurahashi Miyo was the Onmyou Academy Principal.

After school let out today, Kyouko had been called to the principal's office. She originally thought that something had happened, but in the end Principal Kurahashi had found her just because she wanted to chat about her travels. Kyouko showed an exhausted gaze, looking at the box of hot spring manjuu the principal had given her.

".....Guess I'll go back home."

She walked to the elevator, pressing the button. Soon after, the elevator's bell sounded and it stopped, the elevator doors opening.

When the doors opened, "Ah, Natsume-kun!" Natsume was in the elevator. "Yes." He expressionlessly replied to Kyouko's exclamation.

Kyouko's mood instantly turned around and she stepped into the elevator, almost jumping for joy.

"You haven't left yet? Did you stay in the academy to study by yourself?"

"No."

"Did you stay behind for something else? Like talking with the teachers or doing secret training."

"No--"

"Ah, but it's already pretty late, right? You should be free now, right?"

"N--"

"You're free, right? Do you have some time later? If you do, why don't we go have some tea? Just a bit. Okay? Is that alright?"

"--"

Kyouko spoke continuously and vigorously, paying no heed at all to his responses - actually, she just purely didn't hear them. Her face was bashful and her eyes flashed, her expression like a maiden in love.

"Ah, right, Natsume-kun, do you like hot springs manjuu?"

"Yes."

"Really? Then I'll split this box with you. Grandma just gave these to me, she said that she ran off to some hot springs. She spoke for so long, I really couldn't stand it. Ah, but, if she didn't speak for so long, I wouldn't bump into Natsume-kun in the elevator, so I guess it wasn't bad in the end~"

Kyouko's face reddened, a smile on her mouth, and she opened the wrapping paper outside of the box. "Here." Just as she was splitting the hot springs manjuu with Natsume, she noticed that Natsume was holding something in his hands.

Athletic clothing.

And a towel.

"......A towel?" She spoke unconsciously.

"Yes." Natsume replied.

Even the chatterbox Kyouko went speechless for a while, and a strange silent atmosphere pervaded the elevator.

Then, "......Ah, not good." She remembered, pressing the button for the floor.

The elevator silently descended.

"....."

Why was Natsume carrying athletic clothing and a towel? Could he be planning on bathing in the showers underground? Come to think of it, Natsume had moved into the male dorm. Unlike the female dorm, that place was an old dorm built long ago. The showers were definitely not that new, so he wanted to use the showers in the academy instead.

After thinking about that, a splendid proposal suddenly flashed through Kyouko's mind.

"N, Natsume-kun, do you want to go to a hot spring?"

"No."

"N, No, huh..... But sometimes you want to soak in a hot spring, right?"

"Yes."

"I, I think so too, th, then if you're willing....."

Her emotions were agitated and her heartbeat accelerated. She couldn't retreat at this time. Say it, gather the courage to give voice to the words, Kyouko - Kyouko encouraged herself.

"Sh-Sh-Should we go to a hot spring together some day? We can soak in an outdoor hot spring together.....!" She didn't dare look directly at Natsume and closed her eyes, inviting Natsume to a hot spring with a reddened face.

Someone serious like Natsume definitely wouldn't say yes, he would definitely refuse the invite..... But if it weren't just the two of them going, if she also invited Harutora, Touji, and even Tenma, then maybe Natsume would agree to come together.

Natsume and hot springs. Maybe the yukata-wearing Natsume would be moved upon seeing her red-tinged, moist, smooth skin right after soaking in the host spring. Even if there wasn't any opportunity, she would take the initiative and make one, shortening the distance between them in a flash, moving half a step forward from the relationship of friends. Depending on the situation and the developments, there was even a possibility of a k, kiss..... a kiss!

"......!"

Kyouko shut her eyes, silently waiting for Natsume's response. However, no matter how long she waited, Natsume didn't speak up.

He was definitely unable to immediately refuse her and was hesitating over what to say. Natsume really was gentle - what should she do now? Should she pass it over as a joke, or casually invite him again, or get a bit more serious and press harder.....

Kyouko opened her eyes.

Natsume was taking off his clothes.

"......Huh?"

Natsume silently and deftly took off his uniform. Kyouko couldn't understand the scene in front of her for a while, only managing to come to her senses when she saw Natsume unbuttoning the buttons of his shirt one by one.

"N, Natsume-kun! What are you doing!"

White skin was revealed under the opened shirt. Kyouko inadvertently covered her face with her hands - peeking through the gaps of her fingers - and cried out shrilly.

"Wait, Natsume-kun! What are you doing! Why are you suddenly taking off your clothes! Uwah..... Uwaaaaah.....!"

The situation wasn't as simple as a kiss, but instead it was nudity in the elevator. Kyouko remembered the shoujo manga that she had read before. The current kind of scene had indeed appeared in the passionate scenes described in them. She had originally thought they were just fiction used to satisfy the fantasies girls had towards forbidden love.

But thinking carefully, Natsume was the descendent of Abe no Seimei, and in some sense he counted as a person from fantasy. Hence, it was inevitable that this kind of situation would emerge, and anything could happen.

"N, No, Natsume-kun, we can't do this - at least let's change the location - ah, but, I'm really scared--!"

She leaned against the elevator wall, her eyes tightly closed and her body rigid. She hugged herself tightly with her hands - she didn't try to escape - and prepared herself, waiting for the moment to come.

A long, uneventful time passed.

".....N, Natsume.....kun?"

She opened her eyes gingerly.

Natsume wasn't there.

At some time, the elevator had reached the first floor, and the elevator door had opened and just closed again. Kyouko still hugged herself, blinking her eyes in incomprehension.

".....That's weird?"

☆

"A body double? You made that kind of shikigami?" Harutora asked, stunned, and Natsume frowned awkwardly.

"I, I had no other choice! I'm so limited in the dorm, and..... and I'm a girl, so of course I'm obviously out of place in the male dorm! I know that myself! Also, that kind of thing happened yesterday..... That's why I was so anxious to find a way to resolve it!"

Natsume searched for excuses in a roundabout manner. She suddenly showed her original demeanor when she was halfway through speaking.

".....So you made a male-version Natsume simple shikigami? Yeah, if you let those people see you nude in the showers, maybe it indeed could eliminate unnecessary suspicion." Touji smiled wryly, running towards the academy building with Natsume and Harutora.

Harutora and Touji were currently heading towards the academy building with Natsume. Judging by the explanation they heard on the way there, Natsume had probably meant this shikigami body double when she said 'I'm already prepared' in the morning. But, this simple shikigami had moved by itself and had gone somewhere now.

"But, how could the shikigami suddenly move around?"

"I want to know the answer too! Ordinarily, a shikigami can't move by itself without an infusion of magical energy!" After hearing Harutora ask this, Natsume howled crazily in anger. The pedestrians jumped back in surprise, turning around one by one. Natsume came to her senses, hastily recovering her male tone. "Anyways.....

We have to recover the shikigami now! It was originally set for me to control it from a distance, and it can perform some basic movements and reply with 'Yes' or 'No' if someone talks to it, but..... It's a simple shikigami after all, so it's very possible that it might do something uncontrolled!"

Natsume was the one who would be shamed in case the shikigami with the same appearance as her got into some trouble outside, even if it wasn't a female. "The Tsuchimikado family's fame will all be ruined by my hands!" She was extremely anxious and had trouble concealing her grief.

"But since it's a shikigami you made, you should be able to find it very quickly, right?"

"Could it be a body double if you could instantly recognize it as a shikigami? I put a lot of work into disguising it, so you can only locate it visually!"

"...Can't simple shikigami only move by relying on their practitioner's magical energy? Can't you investigate its location by relying on your senses?"

"That shikigami is moving by itself for some reason! I can't track down the magical energy!"

Harutora and Touji made various proposals one after another, and Natsume replied to their questions with a face that seemed like she was about to cry.

Just then, a student staggered over, walking from the direction of the academy building.

He was their classmate, Tenma. For some reason, his face was languished, his head was lowered, and he stumbled forward with powerless steps.

Harutora ran while raising his hand.

"Yo, Tenma! Are you going back?"

"Ah, Harutora-kun..... and, Natsume-kun!?"

Tenma raised his head after hearing Harutora's voice, but his expression immediately clearly wavered once he saw Natsume. He suddenly glanced away, turning his body.

"S, Sorry for just now! But don't misunderstand, I'm not like that! I really don't mean that!" He cried out forcefully, rushing away to escape from Harutora and the others. Harutora - and Natsume - could only blankly watch his back disappear in the crowd.

"Wh, What's up with him.....?"

"Who knows..... The priority is to quickly recover the shikigami!" Natsume spoke and the three continued heading towards the academy building.

Though the Onmyou Academy name was old, the building was a modern-style building with everything set up completely new. When they finally ran over, the automatic doors by the entrance just happened to open and a student walked out from inside.

It was their classmate, Kyouko. For some reason, her face was melancholy and she looked very distressed.

Harutora rushed forward.

"Kurahashi! You haven't left?"

".....Huh? Oh, Harutora..... and, Natsume-kun!?"

Kyouko raised her head after hearing Harutora's voice, but her expression immediately clearly wavered once she saw Natsume. Her face suddenly reddened and she hastily explained in a panic.

"S, Sorry, things really happened too suddenly. Uh..... I, I'll talk about that matter later! Bye.....!" She spoke in a stammer and rushed away to escape from Harutora

and the others after finishing. Harutora - and Natsume - could only blankly watch her back disappear in the crowd.

"Wh, Why is even that person weird?" Harutora furrowed his brow.

".....Could they have seen Natsume's simple shikigami?" Touji muttered quietly.

Maybe believing that the probability was very high, Natsume's face instantly paled and she rushed in the opposite direction of Kyouko, towards the academy building. Harutora and Touji also hurriedly pursued.

"Split up and search, everyone! I'll look underground, Harutora start from the first floor and go up, and Touji start from the roof and go down. Capture him once you find him, and don't let it run around! Understood?"

"Yes!"

Then, Natsume charged ahead towards the stairs and Touji took the elevator as per orders.

"Kon! You help too."

"A-A-As you command!"

After receiving Harutora's summons, Kon suddenly appeared next to him in the form of a suikan-wearing little girl. Animalistic ears stuck out from the girl's short hair and a leaf-shaped fluffy talk grew out from behind her.

She was Harutora's defensive shikigami, Kon.

After Harutora called Kon out, the two of them split up to search the first floor classrooms.

The students had mostly left the academy building already, and hence there were few opportunities for the shikigami to come in contact with others. At the same time, they couldn't get any relevant information and could only rely on their own efforts.

"...Damn, he's not here either. Kon, did you find him?"

"N-N-No one is here."

"Okay, let's go to the second floor."

He turned around, running towards the stairs, and incidentally bumped into Natsume who was about to go up the stairs. He was greatly taken aback.

"Huh, Natsume? You're so fast, did you finish searching underground?"

"No."

"What? What are you doing, then why are you here--"

Natsume's cold reply made Harutora frown. Suddenly, he had a flash of insight, asking: "Right, could you be the simple shikigami?"

"No."

".....That's weird? So you're really Natsume? Weren't you underground looking for the shikigami?"

Harutora was extremely confused. Natsume stood in the stairwell, her abnormally cold expression staring blankly at Harutora.

Just then, Kon floated in midair, leaning her face towards Natsume. She squinted her bright blue eyes, focusing on observing Natsume from a close distance.....

"H-H-Harutora-sama, this is a sh-shikigami, not Natsume-dono!"

"What? But she just said she wasn't a shikigami."

"I, I fear he was ordered to reply that way, as it is a fake."

"Ah, right."

Since it couldn't let others notice it was a shikigami, it couldn't honestly reply 'yes' to that question. Also, that cold attitude wasn't like the original. Now that he thought calmly, this definitely was the simple shikigami that Natsume had made.

But.....

"How incredible, it's basically from the same mold as the original."

"A-After all, it is a disguised shikigami."

"She said this was a male version shikigami. I thought it would be more like a boy."

"I, If I may be so direct, the body double would lose its original purpose if its external appearance was different from normal."

Kon's words were reasonable. Harutora admired it more and more, walking up next to the simple shikigami whose appearance was the same as Natsume's. Facing Harutora who continued to size it up with his eyes, the simple shikigami just coldly looked back at him.

".....Yeah, I can't see anywhere it's different from the original even from this close."

Since it was a simple shikigami, it shouldn't have its own will. Even if he knew that only its outer appearance was similar, he still couldn't help but have the mistaken feeling that he was staring at Natsume.

"Right, I have to quickly contact Natsume and bring him somewhere no one will pass through..... Ah, but will this thing listen to me?"

After all, he had worked quite hard just to move the simple shikigami that he had made, so Harutora could only feel anxious.

"Yes."

Unexpectedly, Natsume's shikigami answered honestly. "Huh?" Kon's eyes lit up as she heard this and she leaned her face in next to the simple shikigami again, her little nose sniffing around everywhere.

Then, her expression turned to surprise.

"H-H, Harutora-sama! This servant carries Harutora-sama's aura! It is H-Harutora-sama's shikigami!"

"What? What are you talking about?"

"What I mean is, Harutora-sama's magical energy is allowing this shikigami to move independently."

"But isn't it a simple shikigami that Natsume made?"

"N, Natsume-dono indeed created the vessel, but the shikigami has Harutora-sama's magical energy! This is definitely true!"

Kon's expression was serious and she didn't seem to be lying. Harutora became less and less sure what exactly was going on.

"But..... Why? I don't remember doing such a thing?"

"I, If I may speculate, maybe it was the morning....."

"The morning?"

"I, In order to complete your assignment of making the simple shikigami move, you released especially strong magical energy."

"......Ah."

Harutora had indeed released magical energy without restraint after waking up this morning. He wasn't good at controlling his magical energy, and it was only his horsepower that was strong. In today's practical coursework, the simple shikigami of the student next to him had moved by itself because of his magical energy. Maybe

a similar accident had occurred to the room next door today morning in the dorm. Perhaps after Natsume left her room and a certain period of time, the simple shikigami had started moving independently.

That kind of situation wasn't impossible.

"So that's why he listens to me?"

"This servant must recognize H-Harutora-sama as its master....."

Kon's tone was a bit sullen, like she was unhappy at seeing Harutora have a shikigami other than her. Harutora's face went ashen and he gasped.

".....That means, it's my fault! Uh oh~"

If Natsume noticed that he was the culprit, she would definitely leave him no mercy. Harutora fretted, thankful that he had noticed the shikigami before it had stirred up any trouble.

He took out his phone, sending a text message to inform Natsume and Touji that he had found the shikigami.

"We have to hide him before anyone sees..... Okay, come with me."

"Yes."

"....."

"H, Harutora-sama! Is anything wrong?"

".....It's nothing, I just feel like this thing is really compliant."

The simple shikigami with Natsume's external appearance stared at Harutora like a child looking at its parent.

It had clear, round eyes and smooth, white skin, staring at him with a defenseless expression. Since the true Natsume had a 'twisted personality', the disparity between

the two dazzled him. Even if he knew that the shikigami wasn't Natsume, he still couldn't control his agitated heart.

"......He's..... male."

Harutora murmured, looking at the shikigami's chest. Though the design of the uniform was also related..... Extremely unfortunately, he couldn't see any difference with the original.

"......Do I have to bathe with this thing? That would really make me nervous."

"H-Harutora-sama!"

"I'm joking."

Natsume had said that this shikigami was meant for her to control from a long distance. Then, its words and actions during actual use should be no different from the normal Natsume. Harutora laughed lightly a couple times and walked down the stairs.

Just as he was heading down the stairs, "Huh! H-H-H-Harutora-sama!" A strange cry came from Kon behind his back. He looked back and almost couldn't stop himself from yelling in shock.

Natsume was taking off her clothes.

No, more accurately, the simple shikigami with Natsume's external appearance was taking off its clothes. Moreover, this was in the stairwell.

"What the hell!"

Harutora hastily rushed forward, tightly grabbing the shikigami's hands. But the shikigami ignored its master Harutora, still forcefully continuing to unclothe.

"What is this thing doing!"

"I, It is moving to perform its purpose!"

"What do I have to do to make it stop?"

"R, Regretfully, that is impossible during the process....."

"You mean it'll only stop after taking off its clothes! Why exactly is it suddenly stripping!"

Natsume - No, the simple shikigami with Natsume's appearance - ignored Harutora's impedance, taking off its clothing one by one in broad daylight. Harutora desperately grabbed the shikigami.

Natsume would suffer here if it were seen nude in this kind of place even if it was only a body double that was unclothed. In addition, Natsume would definitely kill him out of embarrassment and anger if he were the one who had caused this disaster. Harutora grabbed the uncontrollable shikigami, planning on escaping to an empty classroom.

"Really~? Fujino, that's such an exaggeration."

"Of course it's real. A real fantasy is happening in our dorm. There are new developments every day, so I can't even look away for a moment--"

The first floor. Two women were passing through the corridor in front of the stairs. Once they noticed Harutora, they immediately stopped moving. One of them recognized Harutora. She was the dorm manager Fujino.

Four gazes crossed. Fujino and her female companion looked up at Harutora and the others with shocked faces.

The half-nude and intensely resisting Natsume. Harutora who was forcefully holding Natsume and trying to escape from the area.

"This is a misunderstanding!" Harutora sputtered to defend himself.

The two of them suddenly gasped.

"IT'S REAL FANTASYYY!"

"AND DREEEAM!"

"What are you taking pictures of!"

Harutora let out an angry roar. Only then did Fujino come to her senses - or at least, she should have come to her senses.

"Ah! I accidentally started taking pictures. But, this won't do, Harutora-kun! Both sides have to agree for this kind of thing-- B, But it's also important to be a little forceful occasionally! After all, you're both young!"

"What are you talking about!? Stop taking all those pictures with your phone! And I don't share your opinion!"

"Hello, Tsuchimikado Harutora-kun, I'm the female dorm manager, Kifu Ako! I've heard a lot about you, we practically talk about you every day."

"Hello, Kifu-san! Please stop constantly taking pictures before you greet, and delete the data!"

The two managers ignored Harutora's red-faced, angry roars, still breathing heavily and looking excited despite their age. They constantly took pictures of Harutora and the simple shikigami with their phones. Kon was frightened pale because of their amazing momentum and didn’t know how to save Harutora from this crisis, only able to stand in place.

"What's going on~? It's so noisy....."

"Did something happen? What's....."

Female students noticed this crisis, walking towards the staircase to take a look..... Their movements suddenly stilled. Some blushed fiercely, and others exclaimed out loud, with some shouting: "It's a story from a cell phone novel!" and hastily running

off to inform their friends. Perhaps these people were students who had stayed behind in the academy building, and for some reason they were all girls. Harutora wept, actually letting out a few manly tears.

The rumor instantly spread through the entire academy, and of course the dorm wasn't excluded from it.

".....G, Good morning....."

The next day, a tense atmosphere immediately spread through the dorm cafeteria once Harutora and Natsume appeared.

The students eating quietly said 'I, I'm full.....', or 'M, Me too.....' one by one, hastily leaving without finishing their breakfast. Of course, no one spoke to the two of them. Never mind anyone relieving the awkwardness with a joke, no one even dared look at them. Harutora frowned and Natsume's shoulders trembled in anger.

After everyone left, Fujino mouthed 'don't mind it', glancing at them, and then walked out of the cafeteria. She didn't speak up, maybe out of consideration of their feelings, but who could blame them for angrily cursing her to themselves.

The only person left in the cafeteria was Touji who had arrived in the cafeteria earlier. He looked at the two of them, helplessly shrugging his shoulders.

Harutora's mood sank and he sighed heavily. Natsume's eyes brimmed with tears, cursing: "Dis is fumiliading....."

In the end, the students in the dorm had almost no chance of noticing Natsume's true identity.

But, only after seventy-five arduous days were the two Tsuchimikados able to wash off the suspicion that had arisen in everyone.

Story 3 - Escape from Dougenzaka

"Shopping?"

"Yeah, do you want to go shopping together tomorrow if you're free?"

The nation's premier Onmyouji cultivation facility, the Onmyou Academy.

In the corridor of the Onmyou Academy dorm, Tsuchimikado Harutora was currently chatting with the student who had just passed by. She was Tsuchimikado Natsume, Harutora's childhood friend.

Natsume seemed like she had just finished showering. She wore loose baggy athletic clothing, with a towel wrapped around her head of dripping black hair.

She deliberately wore this rather large athletic clothing to conceal the curves of her body. However, the faintly red-tinged skin that was visible was tender and smooth, and the fine white neck exposed to the outside didn't seem at all like it would appear in this kind of place - the male dorm.

The wrongly-sized athletic clothing seemed to accent her childishness and willfulness. Maybe she wasn't used to this kind of dress, as Harutora saw her step on her own pants legs more than five times. He wondered how her true identity had managed to last this long without being exposed.

"......Harutora?"

"Yeah? ......Oh, Sorry." Harutora noticed he was staring, hastily coughing a few times to conceal it. "Anyway, I've been studying almost the whole time since I came to Tokyo, and I've almost never gone out."

"Of course you can't go out, since you can't keep up with the curriculum."

"Uh, I guess that's true..... But I still haven't been able to buy things like clothes or furniture! Especially clothes, I haven't brought any winter clothes from home, so I'm out of clothes to wear already."

"You can wear the uniform."

"I'm talking about normal clothes! Also, I managed to leave home and come to Tokyo, but every day I'm either going to the academy or back to the dorm! I almost can't take it! I want to relax once in a while too!"

Harutora had only transferred into the Onmyou Academy half a year after Natsume, and he was originally an outsider with regard to Onmyoudou. Hence, he had to put more effort in to be able to keep up with the progress of the curriculum, and he lived a life of scrambling after schoolwork all the time.

Tomorrow was Sunday, so he didn't need to go to class.

"I want to go have fun, I want to go have fun!" He repeated forcefully, clenching his fists. His expression couldn't conceal his suffering.

This was the point of view of a perfectly healthy boy - Harutora believed this, but for some reason Natsume's gaze was a bit impatient, like a big sister staring at a belligerent child.

Then, Natsume sighed. She didn't seem helpless, nor did she show a wry smile.

"Okay, I'll come shopping with you."

"Really? Great! I'll have to sleep early tonight since we decided to go shopping tomorrow. Good night, Natsume. I'll see you in the dorm cafeteria tomorrow morning!"

Harutora's expression instantly became joyful and he walked back to his own room in high spirits.

Natsume watched him leave, a wry smile finally emerging on her face as she quietly said: "......I hope the weather's good tomorrow."

The weather was extremely sunny the next day.

Harutora arrived at the first-floor cafeteria ahead of time to wait. Once he saw Natsume appear, he said out loud: "No way?" and furrowed his brow.

"......Natsume."

"What's wrong? Did you wait long?"

"Well, I didn't wait very long....."

Harutora sized Natsume up from head to toe. Natsume couldn't help but look distracted, glancing at him with a "Huh?". She didn't look to be in a bad mood.

Harutora sighed.

"......Why are you wearing the uniform?"

"Huh? Didn't you want to go shopping?"

"Right, I wanted to go 'shopping'! Not to the academy to take classes! Why do you even wear your uniform when you go out to have fun?"

Natsume who had appeared in the cafeteria still wore the specially designed, black Onmyou Academy uniform that resembled imperial clothing.

Harutora spoke impatiently and Natsume replied huffily.

"Wh, What's the problem, I just wanted to wear the uniform out."

"How can there be no problem, the Onmyou Academy uniform is so conspicuous. Also, how can we have fun like this?"

Harutora wore a T-shirt, jacket, and jeans. Though he hadn't particularly paid attention to his dress, the relaxed style suited him reasonably well.

"But..... I don't have anything else to wear outside." Natsume spoke distressedly.

"What? No way? Why?"

"Wh, Why....." Natsume tossed her head in offense, glaring at Harutora. Then, she suddenly lowered her voice, even changing her tone. "".....Do I even need to say? I, I don't have male clothing."

With that, Harutora exclaimed "Oh", finally understanding Natsume's point.

Harutora and Natsume had been born in the Tsuchimikado family, a famous Onmyoudou family. Harutora was from the branch family, but Natsume was the successor of the main family. According to the branch family tradition, Harutora had to serve Natsume and become her shikigami.

On the other hand, Natsume obeyed the main family tradition and concealed her own gender - She dressed as a male to enter the Onmyou Academy to study, not allowing others to learn that she was a girl. Only her childhood friend Harutora and their classmate Ato Touji knew her secret.

Her saying this reminded Harutora that he had only seen Natsume dressed up back at home. She always wore athletic clothing in the dorm.

"B, But what did you do before? Did you wear your uniform every time you went out?"

"I never went out alone..... Even when I did, I was just going to the bookstore or the convenience store....."

"Uwah, what a lonely life."

"Th, That's none of your business! I came to Tokyo to become an Onmyouji. It's enough to wear my uniform, sleeping clothes, and at the most athletic clothes as well!" Natsume spoke agitatedly, clearly forcing herself. However, she didn't admit defeat, inviting solitude and loneliness instead.

".....O, Okay, why don't you come buy clothes with me today. I'll help you pick out some suitable clothes."

"What? Don't look down on me! Listen, I don't want to buy any clothes, and I don't like noisy places--!"

"Okay, okay, don't worry. I'll tell you what's popular now so that you won't lose face."

"Don't insult me! I'm not going anymore, since I oppose reasons like 'having fun' in the first place." Natsume pouted, her face flushed from anger.

It couldn't be told from her external appearance, but Natsume's personality was actually quite stubborn. Things would be bad if he got on her bad side.

"Alright, alright." Harutora hastily spoke up to appease her anger. "I'm not familiar with this area, and you lived here for half a year, so you should know better than me, right?"

"Why don't you just ask Touji for that kind of thing. He was originally from here."

"It seems like he has business today."

".....Business? He's not going with us today?"

"Yeah, but it's stupid to go shopping alone. Please come with me, Natsume." Harutora laughed to placate her.

Once the originally angry Natsume heard that Touji couldn't come, her face suddenly changed. Since the three of them had almost always moved together recently, she seemed to have believed that today would also be the same.

"......It's only the two of us today?"

"Yes."

"......Only the two of us are going to go shopping?"

"Right."

"......Then th-this is a d--"

"Huh?"

Harutora didn't hear clearly and asked back in confusion. "N-Nothing!" For some reason, Natsume blushed, turning her back to Harutora after saying that.

The small back facing Harutora seemed uneasy and anxious. Harutora's mind was filled with questions. He didn't know whether to speak up or not and could only silently watch Natsume's reaction.

Not long after--

"O, Okay! I'll go with you today, I have no choice!"

Natsume recovered her male tone, speaking up. She turned around, her mouth faintly curving up. Harutora secretly wondered whether he had just been over-thinking things.

Harutora didn't understand the sudden change in his childhood friend's attitude, but he didn't dare ask for a clear reason from the beaming and pleased Natsume. He just replied: "......Okay" and nodded his head obediently.

They didn't know that the dorm manager Fujino happened to be grinning in the corridor outside the dorm cafeteria, excitedly pressing her ear against the door to eavesdrop.

The Onmyou Academy was in the Shibuya district. Even though he had said they would 'go out to have fun', it was actually just a short walk.

After leaving the dorm, Harutora and Natsume first walked to the busiest district of Shibuya, the JR Shibuya Station.

This place was normally hustling and bustling, and it was even more packed on a sunny Sunday. The two were bathed in the autumn sunlight as they leisurely strolled through the crowd of people.

Harutora wore a refreshing smile, looking around the group of people on the road.

"As expected of Yashibu, the weekends are so busy."

"Y, Yashibu..... You sound like a weird foreigner. Don't say that, it's so embarrassing."

"Huh? It's embarrassing? But Touji said that people in Tokyo would say the names backwards....."

"Harutora, he was tricking you."

"Tricking me? So that's why Kyouko laughed? Tenma also looked troubled....."

"At least you should have noticed when no one around you spoke like that."

"But after I came to Tokyo, I actually heard someone else talk like that."

"Really? Who?"

"Ohtomo-sensei."

"....."

Kurahashi Kyouko and Momoe Tenma were classmates of Harutora and Natsume, and Ohtomo Jin was their homeroom teacher.

Harutora, whose mistake had been pointed out, frowned with a displeased face. Natsume sighed - giggling lightly.

"I-It's been a long time since we had fun like this, especially w-with just the two of us!" Then, Natsume spoke with a bit of bashfulness.

"Huh? --Oh, right. Since the incident in the summer, I always felt like it wasn't a time to play around..... How long has it been since we went out? We haven't played together since we grew up, right?"

"Haha, that's too much of an exaggeration. Before Touji came, we went to the fireworks festival--"

"Fireworks? When was that?'

"Two years ago-- Ah, no! I, I think I remembered wrong! Uh..... r, right! It seems like we didn't play together after we grew up. Ahaha, how nostalgic!"

For some reason, Natsume became flustered and suddenly laughed fakely a few times, pretending to be casual. Harutora furrowed his brow, but Natsume hastily changed the topic with a smile.

"R, Right, where do you want to go first! I remember you said you wanted to buy clothes."

"Huh? Let me think, I wanted to buy winter clothes and then help you find a few clothes..... I don't have much money on me, so all we can do afterwards is go to an arcade or a manga store..... What about you? Is there anywhere you want to go?"

"Me? I don't know much about these things, so you can decide."

"Alright then, we'll just stroll around Shibuya. It should be pretty interesting."

"Haha, that's right..... Strolling around leisurely is really like a..... date....."

"Huh? What did you say?"

"Nothing, I didn't say anything~" After saying this, Natsume walked in front of Harutora with light steps, her head of black hair and the pink ribbon tied in her hair prancing along with her steps. She was happy for some reason, her face with a joyous expression that seemed like she might lose control of the smile on her face at any time.

"Let's go find your clothes first."

"Alright, thanks."

"Huh? Thanks for what?"

"Eh? Thanks for leading the way....."

Natsume suddenly jumped in surprise after hearing Harutora say this.

"I'm leading the way? I don't go out very often, how could I lead the way?"

Natsume's eyes widened and she stressed this point that wasn't something to be proud of. Harutora could only shrug his shoulders unconcernedly.

"I don't mean for you to make recommendations. I mostly wear second-hand clothes, so it's find if you just bring me to a place where lot of those kinds of stores would be gathered."

"I said I don't know! Also, I never go out to buy clothes!"

"What? How is that possible? Never mind male clothing, don't you have several female clothes?"

"Th, Those are all from mail-order....."

"Mail order? Why?"

"W, Why..... In stores, there are shop attendants who run up to ask you things....." Natsume explained awkwardly.

Come to think of it, Natsume was unusually shy, particularly 'in private' when she wasn't dressed as a male. "No way." Harutora scratched his head, seeming quite troubled.

"So that wasn't a joke, you're really completely unfamiliar with Shibuya?"

"I, I wouldn't say completely unfamiliar, I'm just not very familiar....."

"But you can't think of anywhere we could go, right? That sucks, I don't know if we can find a place by strolling around..... After all, this place is so big."

Harutora's luck was extremely poor, so he couldn't expect to randomly run into a secondhand clothing store suitable for him.

".....I, Is it that annoying not to know where to go?" Natsume looked at him anxiously.

"It should be resolvable, I think."

"Do we ask the police?"

"Police? We don't need to go through that much trouble. Let's just walk around the area first." Harutora smiled, beginning to walk again. Natsume silently followed behind him.

"......I really should have gotten Touji to come with us."

It was also Harutora's first time in a place as big a Shibuya. He mumbled with a wry smile, secretly reflecting on his hasty actions. Rather than shooting for the moon, he should have found someone familiar with this place in order to actually get results.

But, once this unintentional sentence reached the ears of Natsume behind him, her heart suddenly leaped, her steps went awry, and anger instantly flashed across her face, also leading to a haughty arrogance.

"......Th, This is all your fault for failing to plan. Even though you wanted to buy clothes, you didn't investigate which store you wanted beforehand, right?"

"I said, I thought I could ask you--"

"What's that supposed to mean? Are you saying it's all my fault?"

"Th, That's not what I mean."

"In the first place, it's all your fault for wanting to rely on others from the beginning. That way of thinking is way too irresponsible. That's why things go bad once something slips up."

"Uh, I guess....."

"Don't always think that everything will turn out well."

"....."

Her attitude flipped and her tone suddenly became acrid. Harutora, his face displeased, didn't get what had happened.

"……What are you mad about?"

"I, I'm not mad."

"You're obviously mad. You're acting childish."

Natsume's lips instantly went stiff after Harutora retorted.

"Y, You were the one who invited me out, shouldn't you be deciding where to go?"

"......Tch, it was my fault, I shouldn't have asked you to come. I didn't think you would be this unfamiliar to this place."

"Y, You really are blaming me! And what's up with your tone? Don't forget, you're my shikigami!"

"......Yes yes, with a master who shuts herself in day and night and who can't get anywhere without me leading the way."

"I, I don't shut myself in! I go to class properly every day--!"

"You only walk to the academy and the dorms, right? You're completely shut inside the Onmyou Academy."

The two of them bickered and the atmosphere grew more and more dangerous.

Natsume's wide, clear eyes glared at Harutora, her lips pursed. Then, she suddenly turned around, silently striding forward.

"Tch..... Wh, What are you doing, are you going back?"

"No! As you expected of me, I'll bring you to buy clothes!"

"What are you talking about? You don't know this place, right?"

"I just need to find some random stores! It's easy!"

Natsume's shoulders trembled in anger as she rapidly strode forward alone. Damn, he had said too much. Harutora regretted, since after all once he annoyed Natsume, it was just a waste of breath to continue convincing her.

"......This is bad." Harutora's face soured and he lamented.

It was Sunday, with the warm autumn sun high in the sky. But above the head of the hastily pursuing Harutora, a vesture of clouds gradually eroded the cloudless sky.

"......Hey, Natsume. I shouldn't have spoken so angrily, please don't be mad."

"Shut up, just follow me quietly."

"But it's almost three, and I'm starving....."

"Didn't you say you wanted to 'buy clothes first'? If you're only going to complain, why don't you hurry up and help look."

Natsume advanced indifferently without stopping along the way or turning back. Harutora followed behind her, exhaustedly looking up at the sky while maintaining a distance of several strides between the two of them.

The clear blue sky in the morning was now already covered with clouds and it seemed like it could start raining at any time.

"Really, I finally got a good Sunday....." He mumbled listlessly. Maybe hearing his complaint, the back of Natsume who walked in front of him twitched and her steps became more impatient. Harutora inadvertently sighed.

In the beginning, Natsume had planned on going into department stores to find secondhand clothing stores. Of course, Harutora stopped her immediately, but he had stopped holding any expectations from that time on. Afterwards, they had looked along the road, but unfortunately their luck was no good - which was within expectations - and they hadn't even seen a single secondhand clothing store.

Harutora said several times that the store didn't matter, but Natsume ignored him. Maybe it was in a small alley, not the main road - he calmly guided her into an alley, and then they finally noticed a secondhand clothing store, but unfortunately it just happened to be a store holiday. "Today! Sunday!" He couldn't help but be stunned, but it seemed that the store manager had suddenly fallen ill, further proving that he was an unlucky person.

"......Natsume, you don't need to look anymore. This is all my fault, I'm sorry, why don't we go eat....."

"Shut up! Talk about it after we finish buying the clothes! Next is this alley!"

Natsume proclaimed, turning into a small alley from the main road as if she had to save face.

"......It's all your fault for saying you wanted to buy secondhand clothes.....!"

"That's not the problem..... I mean, you're right, sorry....."

"Also, Harutora, your taste in clothing is bad! What's up with that jacket? To think there's a tiger sewn into it..... Could it be that you wear a tiger because your name has 'tora' in it?"

"......Yeah, that's right."

"That's stupid, it looks tasteless. No wonder you don't make a good first impression!"

"......Yes."

Harutora lowered his head, crestfallen and full of complaints, behind Natsume whose expression was dismal. His prized jacket had been shot down several times in succession, but he was no longer angry, just amazed that Natsume's anger could continue for this long. He believed that she was probably hungry as well.

"......Could it be that you're angry because you're hungry....."

"Harutora! What did you say?"

"No, I didn't say anything."

After Harutora replied, the cry of a stomach immediately sounded, and it wasn't a noise that had come from Harutora's stomach.

Natsume who walked ahead inadvertently stopped moving, her shoulders shaking uncontrollably. An awkward silence filled the area, but because Harutora was exhausted, he couldn't think of anything that could appease her emotions.

Not long after, Natsume strode forth in a huff like she would knock over everything on the road that was in her way, walking deep into the alley.

Harutora was helpless, inadvertently glancing at the signboard next to him--

'Paradise Hotel - Rest: Four thousand yen'

"Uwah!"

His listless exhaustion instantly evaporated into smoke and Harutora frantically looked around him in shock, confirming exactly what kind of place he had walked into.

Complex narrow alleys, with the dark sky mapping out a gloomy scene in midday. There were few people, and the only people they occasionally ran into were all pairs of lovers, and strangely, every pair of lovers had their heads lowered.

Suspicious hotels stood everywhere in great numbers, and occasionally even more suspicious restaurants or stores would show up.....

"H, Hold on, Natsume! Stop!"

He rushed forward, grabbing Natsume's arm from behind. Natsume shook him off angrily, freeing the arm that had been grabbed.

"Don't touch me, Harutora! I'm not hungry at all and I haven't given up!"

"Calm down, Natsume. I understand your mood, but this place really looks bad!"

"What's bad about it? Didn't you say we should look in small alleys!"

"It's true that I said that, but, this alley is a little... Uh...!"

Even Harutora's face reddened as he said this. Natsume stared at Harutora, a confused expression flashing over her face.

"L, Look around." Flustered, Harutora hastily spoke in a whisper.

".....Isn't it very normal? What's strange?"

"Wh, What's strange..... You can't see it? The places around here are all 'that kind' of hotel!"

"What exactly are you panicking about? What's strange about hotels?"

Natsume knit her brows in vexation, looking at Harutora. Harutora coughed lightly, leaning towards Natsume's ears and quietly saying a simple, clear explanation. After hearing that, Natsume's eyes widened and her cheeks were momentarily dyed red.

"What? These are l-l-l.....!"

".....Great, I don't have to explain what a love hotel is."

"Don't misunderstand, I-I didn't mean to.....!"

"Calm down. I know you didn't mean that, but if others see even a small quarrel in this kind of place--"

Before he had even finished speaking, an unfamiliar male-female pair walked out of a love hotel.

Harutora and Natsume rapidly retreated to hide by the road, pretending to look at the advertisement leaflets stuck to the wall while they waited with bated breath for the couple to leave.

Natsume was trembling in shock.

"I, In broad daylight.....!"

"It's a Sunday....."

"Th-They, They have no sense of shame.....!"

"Natsume, isn't the leaflet you're staring at also very embarrassing?"

Upon hearing Harutora say this, Natsume hastily paid attention to what kind of leaflet was stuck on the wall she was staring at. It was an advertisement for 'Adult sex toys' on which was written 'Fifty percent discount!'. Harutora seemed to hear Natsume's mind snap. Natsume made a soundless scream, swinging her head of hair as she hastily turned her body.

"Anyway, we'll be in trouble if we let someone we know see us in this kind of place. Let's go, Natsume." Harutora said. However, it seemed that Natsume hadn't recovered from the shock.

".....Why..... are things going so..... badly....."

"Huh, Natsume?"

".....I was looking forward to this date..... It's all ruined....." She mumbled, seeming at a loss.

Unfortunately, rain just happened to fall at this time, and moreover it was a torrential downpour.

It was an afternoon thunderstorm. Rain had started to fall after all.

"Ahh, what bad luck....." Harutora said in dismay.

Natsume followed Harutora's gaze and looked up at rainy sky as well.

The huge raindrops continuously assaulted the pair who stood still in the suspicious alley. Natsume looked at the sky, stunned, and soon after--

"......Uu."

"Ugh! N, Natsume, don't cry."

"I'm not crying!!" Natsume yelled tearfully.

Actually, Harutora wanted to cry as well. Most people would believe that suddenly encountering a downpour while standing in front of a love hotel with a girl would be a fortunate sudden occurrence, but he felt nothing of the sort. He was dying from hunger and was also tired from walking, and the rain drenching his body was cold. What a terrible Sunday.

"Damn! Nothing good will come out of continuing to stand here. Let's go, Natsume. Let's just find some cafe and escape the rain for now."

"......Yeah....."

Harutora made the proposal and Natsume finally nodded, no longer being stubborn. Just as the two of them had reached a common consensus--

"Ako, have you found Natsume-kun and Harutora-kun?"

"I haven't, Mako! We lost them!"

Harutora and Natsume knew that they couldn't possibly have misheard. Those were the voices of the male dorm manager Fujino Mako and the female dorm manager Kifu Ako. The two of them enjoyed gossip and loved BL, not exactly qualified to serve as dorm managers. Harutora and Natsume became dumbfounded and looked at each other.

"You didn't hear it wrong, right? Were they really walking this way just now?"

"Definitely! Maybe the two of them finally broke through the final line..... Aaaah! That won't do, I have to stop that sort of action as the dorm manager, but I'm so excited!"

Noisy sounds came from the side and they were drawing closer step by step, obviously searching for traces of the two of them.

At the time, there was only one place that could grant them emergency shelter.

They chose the cheapest room, but it was still an unexpected expense. But honestly, Harutora didn't care about the money problem right now.

This was the first time he had entered a love hotel in his life, and he had even entered with a girl dressed as a male - the girl he had played with since he was small.

"......L-L-Lets stay here for now, since the situation's urgent....."

"......Th-Th-That's true, after all it is an emergency....."

Since he couldn't let the two of them run into him standing in front of a love hotel, Harutora and Natsume had walked embarrassedly into the room, avoiding looking at each other.

The interior of the room was decorated shabbily, and the bathroom was right next to the entrance. There was a small table and a sofa in the room, and there was a LCD television placed next to the wall. There was also a small refrigerator underneath, and in addition, there was a giant bed taking up thirty percent of the entire room.....

"......Uh, it's more normal than I imagined....."

Though the lighting in the room was dark, it was set up the same as a normal hotel at first glance. Moreover, though the size of the bed was large, it was just a normal bed. Harutora had though that these kinds of hotels all had rotating beds, and only then did he notice that there were no mirrors on the wall and he couldn't see into the bathroom from inside the room.

".....R, Right, this is more normal than I imagined. The bed isn't peculiar, there are no mirrors on the walls, and you can't see inside the bathroom from outside....."

Natsume's understanding of love hotels seemed about the same as Harutora's, and because the two of them were alone, she also went back to her normal tone of voice.

She wanted Harutora to sit on the sofa, but he chose to sit on the corner of the bed.

"....."

"....."

"....."

"....."

The two of them opened their mouths, both believing that they should say something to relieve the awkwardness yet unable to find the opportunity. They snuck glances at each other, hastily averting their gazes when they crossed, pretending that they weren't looking at the other person's expression.

"Th, That was really frightening just now, I didn't think we would run into them!" Harutora managed to gather his courage.

"Th, That's right."

"Could those two have been tailing us? I didn't notice at all!"

"M, Me neither."

"They really have nothing better to do. Since we came here, we might as well wait for the rain to stop!"

"Okay....."

Harutora showed a consistent cheerfulness, but conversely it resulted in things seeming even more helpless. On the other hand, Natsume had also relieved herself of her anger from before and she seemed extremely cute, stiffly sitting on the sofa.

The silence extended.

"Wh-Why don't we watch TV." Harutora took the remote control and turned on the television.

Once the television turned on, the screen showed the color of skin and the sound of voices came from the speakers. He frantically turned off the television. Natsume seemed to have glanced at the image on the screen. Her face was red and her body was rigid.

"......S-Sorry....."

"......It's okay....."

"....."

"....."

The atmosphere of the small room became even more awkward amidst the silence, and the two of them sat uncomfortably.

After a while passed, "......Sorry." Natsume broke the silence, apologizing quietly. Harutora made a "Huh?" sound, looking at Natsume. Natsume's head was still lowered, and she mumbled: "......Sorry. You invited me out today..... I shouldn't have gotten mad....."

"Wh, What, so that's what you meant. It's alright, I'm not concerned about it anymore."

"But....."

"You don't need to be concerned, at least I learned a bit more about Shibuya because of it. Also, I can go buy clothes whenever I want."

"But, the two of us finally had a chance to..... have fun together....." After saying this, Natsume's slumped her shoulders.

"Actually, we'll still have a lot of time later, Sunday hasn't ended yet."

"......Harutora-kun."

"And if you really want to talk about it, it was my misfortune that tired you out."

"Th, That's not true!"

"Anyways, this counts as some sort of lesson - that Sundays can occasionally be this bad." Harutora spoke leisurely, and only then did Natsume raise her head. She looked at Harutora, showing a shy smile. "......Yeah."

Her rain-soaked black hair sparkled in the illumination of the room's light, her wet bangs stuck to her cheeks and making her look particularly charming .Harutora's gaze was unconsciously drawn in.

Just then, Natsume sneezed, and only then did Harutora realize that the two of them had been drenched by the rain.

"Oh no, a towel--"

"I-It's alright, I can get it myself--"

The two of them rose simultaneously. Since the space in the room was so narrow, they almost bumped into each other midway and they hastily stopped moving. In the end, it was Harutora who entered the bathroom and took the towel inside to give to Natsume.

"Th, Thanks....."

Natsume received the towel from Harutora's hands, spreading it over her head. She covered her face, drying her wet hair.

The two of them didn't sit back in their original seats, facing each other blankly while standing in front of the bathroom. Then, Natsume sneezed lightly again and Harutora uttered an "Ah", unconsciously murmuring: "Natsume, do you want to take a shower?"

Natsume's movements stopped instantly.

Only after he spoke did Harutora realize that he had misspoke. "I-I don't have any other intentions! I'm just afraid you'll catch a cold! It'll be bad if you catch a cold! If you do--!" He spoke in a stammer, desperately defending himself. Natsume didn't respond, with her face covered by the towel.

"I-I don't mean to force you to shower! Of course, I didn't have any ulterior motives! I was just worried about you catching a cold....."

Harutora regretted deeply, not understanding how he could have casually said those kinds of words. Natsume's body moved and her lips pressed tightly together. She slowly took the towel off her head. Her face was still rosy, but her expression was a bit different from before. She moved her gaze slightly, unwilling to look at Harutora.

"......Okay."

"Huh?'

"If you say so, I'll go shower....."

Her tone showed her fluster and her eyes were no longer evasive, staring straight at Harutora. Her clear eyes looked upwards, looking into Harutora's as if she were confirming.

"......Natsume--" Harutora's mind went white.

"......Ahem."

The two childhood friends suddenly leapt backwards as if they had been shocked, putting distance between each other.

"Wh-What.....?" The panicked Harutora looked back, seeing a small girl kneeling on the large bed.

She wore a suikan like a Japanese doll of a young girl, with what seemed to be fox ears poking out of her beautiful, neat short hair. A fluffy leaf-shaped tail could even be seen behind her back.

She was Harutora's defensive shikigami, Kon.

Normally, she was hiding her body, always waiting upon Harutora by his side and protecting his safety. She hadn't come out to stir up trouble for the whole day today, leading Harutora to completely forget that she was with him.

"Kon?"

"......Yes, it is I, Harutora-sama's loyal retainer, Kon." Kon kneeled on the bed, her eyes closed as she replied solemnly.

"Well, don't come out so suddenly, you almost scared me to death!"

"......I know I should not have, but there was a pressing matter..... Also....." She opened her closed eyes, narrowing her eyes, which shot out a sharp gaze. "Harutora-sama, do you believe I shouldn't have spoken up?"

"Huh? Uh, no, well.....!"

"Would you have preferred to remember I am always by your side later on?"

"N, Not really..... But..... Kon? Your speech seems a bit different from normal, you're not stuttering at all when you talk.....?"

The shikigami's momentum was frightening. Harutora's face went rigid and he didn't dare to say something casually. Natsume next to him covered her head with the towel again, rubbing her hair as if to emphasize that she hadn't heard anything at all.

Kon's tail swished back and forth angrily. The small shikigami stared coldly at the two and coughed again.

"I came to report - Harutora-sama, the enemy's shikigami are approaching, so p-please be on alert."

"......Is that the truth? I don't really believe it....."

"I also think a love hotel's a bit....."

"We'll know if it's true or not when we find them!"

"Right, we'll definitely get conclusive evidence this time - I mean, as the dorm manager, I can't sit and watch young people make irreversible mistakes!"

Four umbrellas were held up in a narrow alleyway. Two of them were Fujino Mako and Kifu Ako's, and the other two were Kurahashi Kyouko and Momoe Tenma's.

Kyouko was dressed fashionably, her appearance cute and sweet, with a beauty that could very well be recruited into an agency if she were walking on Shibuya Street. Tenma wore glasses and he looked plain and unreliable, but he was a kind-hearted boy at first glance.

Kyouko and Tenma were currently following Fujino's orders, sending out simple shikigami whose vessels had been provisionally cut into bird shapes.

"......Really, our weekend was already half-ruined, and we still have to do this kind of thing....."

"......We're pretty unlucky today."

Kyouko muttered a complaint and Tenma spoke quietly with a bitter smile.

The two of them were Harutora's classmates, and though today was a weekend, they had first been called to the Onmyou Academy by their homeroom teacher Ohtomo to help out, and after that, they had been brought to this kind of place by Fujino and Kifu, who had charged into the academy building.

Fujino and Kifu had half-forcefully pulled the pair who had been at the Onmyou Academy into a taxi, taking it to this love hotel-filled place. They seemed to be planning to rely on the power of shikigami in order to find Harutora and Natsume, who had disappeared somewhere.

They looked for a sound reason and said it was for their 'responsibility as dorm managers', but actually they were just nosy. And now that they made students help them indiscriminately dig into personal privacy, this problem was no longer just one of abuse of power.

"......Since it's your 'responsibility as dorm managers', is it okay to make underage students do this kind of thing?"

"It's alright, you don't live in the dorm."

"Hey, that's too harsh."

"Also, aren't you also very interested? Those two really disappeared somewhere. It's 'those' two, you know!"

"That....." Kyouko and Tenma couldn't help but glance at each other.

These few days, there had been rumors that were much more than simple ones flying around regarding the relationship between Harutora and Natsume, and they had spread like wildfire through the academy. Several students, along with Fujino and Kifu, had seen Harutora trying to forcefully hug a half-naked Natsume with their own eyes - and this had even been in the academy. Kyouko and Tenma, who were

familiar with the two, couldn't believe that this was true, but..... If the truth were as the dorm managers said, and the two had vanished into a love hotel.....

"B, But Harutora-kun and Natsume-kun are both guys--"

"Idiot!"

"I-Idiot?"

"Your thoughts are too outdated in this world unrestricted by gender! Also, Natsume-kun is beautiful enough to match those idols on TV! It's easier for forbidden relationship to develop the more beautiful you are!"

Fujino gave off a frightening aura. Tenma was cowardly for a while, not daring to say anything else out of fright.

"N, Natsume-kun definitely wouldn't do that kind of thing! Never mind that idiot Harutora, Natsume-kun's a well-behaved student!"

"Alright, alright, Kyouko-chan, we'll know those things after we investigate." Kifu spoke happily.

Kyouko stared at the two dorm managers unhappily.

".....Fine, since you're so stubborn, I'll just look through every hotel around here and prove Natsume-kun's innocence!"

Just like that, Kyouko and Tenma increased the number of simple shikigami, carefully searching each and every love hotel along this road.

"......Th, That is what's happening."

"How did things become like that! That's way too strange! What exactly is inside the heads of those two dorm managers!" Harutora cursed angrily.

Kon, who was good at stealth, had headed out to observe the situation and then come back to report. It seemed like the 'enemy' shikigami Kon had noticed before were the shikigami of Kyouko and Tenma.

"......This is bad, we're in trouble!"

People had begun to suspect whether Harutora and Natsume were having a 'private affair' due to Natsume's out-of-control, 'male' body double shikigami several days ago in the academy. If the two of them were noticed walking out of a love hotel together, it would truly be impossible to clear up. Especially when the witnesses were Fujino and Kifu.

"No! If this goes on, this misunderstanding will never be resolved! Damn.....!"

Because of the regulations of family traditions, Natsume had to maintain that she was a 'male' in the Onmyou Academy. In other words, there was no way to resolve the misunderstanding. But, even if he took the initiative to expose Natsume's identity as actually a girl, the problem would become even dicier if others learned that a male and female had shared a room.

However, "You don't need to worry, Harutora." Natsume wasn't panicked like Harutora. Her attitude was deeply calm, and her eyes regained the original self-confidence that she had lost before. "Kurahashi-san's strength isn't something to look down on and Tenma-kun is good at manipulating simple shikigami, but unfortunately their strengths are far from mine. Let me deal with these shikigami." She changed back into her male tone to speak.

"Ohh, h-how reliable.....!"

Harutora looked excitedly at Natsume who had calmly said those remarks. Honestly, Natsume was an excellent student who was called a 'genius' in the Onmyou Academy. Her power was outstanding among the first-year students.

But, Kon adopted a difficult expression and continued to speak: ".....I, I, I am extremely sorry, but there is more....."

"Kurahashi, Momoe, what are you underage students doing here? That's no good! As long as I'm still in this world, I definitely won't permit the students in my class to engage in reckless relationships!!"

"Oh god."

"Ohtomo-sensei?"

A young but seemingly old man appeared behind Kyouko and Tenma. He wore aged-looking glasses, with a cordial smile on his face as he walked into the small alley dragging his right foot. Something that looked like the wooden fake leg from a manga was fixed in his right leg, and his right hand held a cane. He was the homeroom teacher of Harutora, Kyouko, and the others - Ohtomo Jin.

"Oh my, Ohtomo-sensei, it's been a while."

"Huh, Kifu-san? And Fujino-san too. What's going on? The two of them don't live in the dorm, right?" Ohtomo was perplexed facing this strange combination. Fujino

immediately put herself forward once she heard this, saying "Ohtomo-san, actually--", explaining the previous situation in a rush.

Ohtomo was first pushed back by Fujino's shocking vigor, but his expression became more and more serious as he listened.

"...I see, I understand. But simple shikigami are also a type of General Onmyoudou, and though they are students, they're still outsiders, so I can't permit them to use shikigami for this kind of purpose."

"N-No?"

"......Makes sense."

Kyouko and Tenma shrugged their shoulders next to the stunned Fujino and Kifu.

General Onmyoudou could be described as a synonym for modern magic, and only professional Onmyouji could use it. Onmyou Academy students weren't limited by provisions, but they shouldn't abuse it.

Ohtomo spoke seriously, and Fujino and Kifu couldn't help but be crestfallen.

"But, I truly understand your feelings! Alright, let me help you out!"

"Sensei?"

"Are you for real?"

Kyouko and Tenma stared at their own homeroom teacher in disbelief, but radiance instantly bloomed in the eyes of Fujino and Kifu, as they simultaneously cried out: "Sensei!" and clasped their hands, moving towards Ohtomo.

Ohtomo showed a self-confident smile.

"A man doesn't go back on his word. Such an interesting - I mean, I'll definitely stop this kind of deviant activity and expose them to the public eye!"

"N-No! How can you publicize that kind of thing?"

"Sensei, calm down!"

Kyouko and Tenma hastily tried to stop the teacher, but Ohtomo didn't heed their obstruction, releasing charms into the rain with a "Hah!" - charms used as vessels.

The many charms immediately transformed into a flock of crows and simultaneously grew wings, hovering above the various love hotels.

"......That is what happened."

"What's that damn instructor doing!" Harutora claws his head and roared angrily. This adult was a bit too childish. Of course, he had entered a love hotel, but happily trying to expose the truth was quite an evil interest.

"That troublemaker should go die! Natsume? It's no problem, right? You should be able to deal with that weird Kansai bastard, right?"

He turned around to plead, but Natsume didn't have any extra energy to spend on him. He saw her running around the room with the blood drained out of her face. Charms were stuck all over the walls, and Natsume was hurrying to infuse these charms with magic, her expression extremely grave.

"......N, Natsume? What are you doing?"

"Setting up a barrier, of course! That stupid Kon, why didn't she say that earlier!"

"Wh, What's going on? Could this be big trouble?"

"Stupid! Ohtomo-sensei is a professional Onmyouji! Also, we're not sure about his true power, so we can't do anything about it!"

Natsume tossed her hair breathlessly and finally finished the barrier.

"N, Natsume? We, uh.....?" Harutora asked gingerly upon seeing his childhood friend so pale.

"......!"

Natsume didn't immediately respond to Harutora's anxious question。 But she suddenly looked far away, calling out: ".....Harutora."

"Wh, What is it?"

"There's still a long future ahead of us, I hope we can always be good friends....."

"Natsume! Please don't! Don't give up your pride so easily!"

He grabbed Natsume's shoulder, shaking her forcefully, but Natsume's eyes were still dim. A tear fell from her empty eyes.

".....Haha, what a short student life, haha....."

"Y-Your eyes! Damn..... Kon! Can you think of anything?"

"Yes, I-I am also powerless....."

"Tch.....!"

Harutora was caught between a rock and a hard place. His heart was fretful. Just as the dejected Harutora, the ashen Natsume, and the helpless Kon were about to give up hope, Harutora's phone rang like the bell of a savior.

"Huh? Why's everyone gathered here, did something happen?" A tart, sarcastic voice sounded from the road.

The rain had stopped, and Ohtomo, Kyouko, Tenma, Fujino, and Ako had put away their umbrellas one by one. Upon hearing the sudden voice from behind, all of them were startled and hurriedly turned to look back.

"What, it's Touji-kun - Huh? Natsume-kun!"

Ohtomo's eyes widened in shock and the other four were also stunned speechless for a while.

Students from Ohtomo's class had walked into the alley from the road - Kyouko and Tenma's classmates Ato Touji, along with Natsume, who walked up behind Touji even though they had been continuously searching for him.

Touji was easygoing but Natsume seemed a bit tense, but her expression looked somewhat pleased.

"N, Natsume-kun? Weren't you with Harutora-kun?" Fujino spoke with an incredulous face.

Natsume smiled lightly upon hearing this.

"Huh? You're very knowledgeable, we were together before noon."

"B, Before noon?"

"Yes, I left after then because I had business with Touji." She explained with a casual demeanor. Kyouko, Tenma, and Ohtomo looked at the stunned Fujino and Kifu with cold gazes.

Natsume and Touji glanced at each other, secretly winking.

It had been Touji's phone call that sounded in the love hotel a while ago. Because he had finished his business, he wanted to ask them to find somewhere to meet up if they were still outside. After picking up the call, Harutora and Natsume had frantically explained the whole story to Touji, begging him to help. They had asked Touji to bring three pairs of clothing, enter the love hotel alone, and then Touji and Natsume would leave the love hotel posing as a couple, and Harutora would also leave after changing into the other set of clothes.

If Ohtomo had released simple shikigami that could lock on to an individual's aura, this plan definitely couldn't succeed. They took the plunge, and it seemed that no matter how powerful Ohtomo was, he couldn't make simple shikigami using such a sophisticated technique on the spot.

"...So?" Touji smiled unconcernedly. "What are you all doing here? I'm very curious about this kind of group being in this love hotel-filled place."

"Ah, uh, well....." Fujino stammered and Kifu's face was dejected. Ohtomo grumbled in dissatisfaction, collecting his simple shikigami, and Kyouko and Tenma shrugged their shoulders.

Just then, "Ohh, Natsume! Touji! Huh? That's weird? Isn't that Fujino-san and Kifu-san~ Kyouko and Tenma, and Ohtomo-sensei too! Why's everyone here~" Harutora appeared, sounding fake.

Fujino and Ako were deeply stunned. The other three collapsed listlessly, but Harutora smiled brilliantly.

"Are you guys looking for something? Or looking for someone? You guys are really busy even on a Sunday! Ahaha!"

Harutora laughed deliberately. It was so unnatural that even Touji and Natsume were dumbfounded.

"I, Impossible....."

"That's strange, I definitely saw him with my own eyes....."

Fujino and Kifu lowered their heads in dejection, and Harutora laughed loudly as if he were telling them to give up completely.

However, "H-H, Harutora-sama! You forgot something!" Kon appeared in midair in the alley in front of a love hotel. Her small hands were held up high while holding a phone as she hurriedly flew towards them.

"Ah, oops." Harutora exclaimed, hastily accepting the phone from the shikigami's hands.

"That was close, I accidentally forgot it - Kon, where did you pick up my phone?"

"I-It was place on the b-bed of the love hotel..... Under the t-towel."

Upon hearing the shikigami's explanation, Harutora smiled wryly and said: "Thanks for finding it."

But--

"'Love hotel', 'bed', 'towel'?"

Fujino, Kifu, Ohtomo, Kyouko, and Tenma spoke in unison.

Natsume's face paled and Touji looked up at the sky helplessly. Kon also made an "Ah" sound, her face going stiff. Harutora was half a beat slower than the others, and his body suddenly froze when he realized his gaffe.

"H, Harutora-kun? You couldn't have....."

"To y-y-your own shikigami....."

"That won't do..... That..... really isn't....."

"Harutora-kun, what did you do to such a small child....."

"......T-Terrible....."

Five cold - even approaching grim - gazes simultaneously shot towards Harutora. "I didn't!" A chill shot through Harutora starting from the bottom of his feet, his face going white in fright.

"Wait, this is a misunderstanding!"

He denied as much as he could, stepping forward, but the five of them hastily retreated to an even farther place upon seeing this. The eyes staring at Harutora looked as if they were staring at a heinous criminal.

"They're misunderstanding! Things aren't like you're thinking! Natsume, explain to them--!"

"......I, I was with Touji....."

"You're not going to save me? Touji!"

"....."

"You're not even going to look at me!?"

Kon's face went completely red and she hid her body as if escaping. Only Harutora was left, desperately trying to clear up the misunderstanding - tragically, the more he desperately he explained, the firmer the attitudes of the five became.

Tsuchimikado Harutora wasn't a homosexual, he was actually a lolicon.

A new cloud of suspicion gathered. A mere seventy-five days might be too short, it seemed that this would take a very long time.

Story 4 - Bloody Holiday

Love at first sight.

I like this bright, joyful smile and couldn't help but want to see it again. But just as I dreamt of it, a rumor entered my ears.

He had an inexcusable relationship with the boy he had played with since childhood.

He had extended his claws to a little girl shikigami.

I didn't think those rumors were true, but I couldn't help but worry. This couldn't go on. I made my decision soon after.

Lunchtime. Students packed the cafeteria of the Onmyou Academy building. Tsuchimikado Harutora, Tsuchimikado Natsume, and Ato Touji managed to find seats, finally able to put their trays on the table and sit down to eat.

"Ah, I'm starving, itadakimasu!" After saying this, Harutora pulled apart the disposable chopsticks, and Natsume next to him called out lightly: "Ah." He glanced to the side, noticing that Natsume hadn't separated her chopsticks well and was angrily glaring at a pair whose lengths weren't the same. She was extremely bad at breaking disposable chopsticks.

"You broke them badly again, huh. I'll go get a new pair of chopsticks."

"......You don't need to take the trouble, it's not like I can't use them." Natsume replied snappily to the dumbfounded Harutora. "This pair of chopsticks didn't break

well because of the moisture..... Also, it's too environmentally unfriendly to be using disposable chopsticks in modern times. It would be best to change to plastic chopsticks as soon as possible."

"......Just because you can't break chopsticks....."

"Th, That's not it! I'm thinking about the environment of the earth--"

"Should I give this pair of chopsticks to you?"

"I said, you don't need to take the trouble! Anyway, it's enough if I can use them to eat."

Natsume huffily said: "Itadakimasu", then put her chopsticks into her mixed egg ramen. Harutora snickered silently, eating his mochi udon. Also, Touji sat across from them. He had already started eating, probably not intending to listen to the conversation of the Tsuchimikados.

An ordinary daily life and a usual featureless lunchtime scene.

However--

"......Look, it's him."

"Natsume-kun is the one sitting next to him, right? He's so handsome, it's no wonder there would be a 'mistake'....."

"No no, he reached out to his own shikigami....."

"Ah, I saw that shikigami! She was a cute little girl who looked like a doll."

"Which one is his true target though? His exterior appearance isn't remarkable, so it's really hard to understand."

"But, this really is like something that would happen in a traditional family....."

As Harutora ate his noodles, it seemed that secret whispers were rustling constantly all around him. Perhaps half of it was Harutora's own imagination, but the remaining half.....

"....."

He chewed the mochi, glancing in the direction the voices came from. The female students sitting in the distance and sneakily watching them immediately and hastily averted their gazes once they were glanced at.

"....."

Touji noticed Harutora's frown, speaking while chewing today's special of fried mackerel. "Don't pay attention to them. They're probably students who live in the female dorm. This kind of situation will probably go on for a long time since that manager's spreading rumors around everywhere."

".....You sure speak carelessly when it's not something to do with you."

"Sorry, this never had anything to do with me."

Touji spoke leisurely, and Harutora's face became even more helpless.

There were rumors that Harutora was not happy to hear about spreading throughout the Onmyou Academy with the students who lived in the dorms as the center. The rumors marked Harutora as going out with the 'male student' Natsume, or said that he had done something to his little-girl-shaped shikigami.

Of course, these were nonsense - actually, they were misunderstandings. Unfortunately, he couldn't say they were 'groundless', as there was 'evidence' for the rumors to propagate, which made things even dicier.

"This is good too, you can successfully work hard for now and focus your mind on coursework. It's a blessing in disguise." Natsume spoke leisurely. "Don't joke

around." Harutora rebuked her hastily after hearing that. "This matter is tied to you. You don't want to be inexplicably misunderstood, right?'

"Doesn't matter, I don't care about the chatter around me. I've done nothing wrong, so naturally I'm not afraid of what people say." Upon seeing how casual his childhood friend's attitude was, Harutora couldn't help but click his tongue and reproach her: "You don't understand at all how painful it is for a guy to be looked at by the suspicious gazes of girls."

"I have no idea about that, seeking my sympathy is just asking for trouble."

Harutora's face sank in anger after hearing Natsume's reply.

Natsume wore a male uniform, but she was actually a girl. She was obeying the tradition of the main family and hid her gender every day, so naturally she couldn't sympathize with Harutora's trouble regarding boys.

"Damn - I always thought that I was born unlucky, but it seems like I've been getting even more unlucky recently....."

"Anyway, you were never well-liked by girls. Why don't you look at it normally, don't give up living."

"What are you joking about, I've never been suspected of liking guys or little girls in my life."

"Then think about moving forward--"

"Have you thought about my future?" Natsume shrugged her shoulders, paying no heed to Harutora as he protested agitatedly. "You're just making it worse, you should just give up resisting altogether." After saying this, she lifted her bowl and blew on it to cool it down a little, then put her mouth on the bowl. Maybe because she was a girl, Natsume seemed calm. In addition, she even seemed satisfied with the situation.

A wry smile flashed over Touji's mouth as he listened to the conversation of the two.

"......But, you don't need to be afraid of him being entangles with strange people, so you can finally relax."

'Pfah!' Natsume coughed violently while holding the bowl. "What's that supposed to mean?" Touji shrugged his shoulders silently, not replying to Harutora's question.

The three of them finished eating lunch, gathering their eating utensils and leaving the academy cafeteria.

"...H-H-Harutora-sama--"

A light, stammering voice sounded at some time, catching Harutora's attention. That voice was from Harutora's defensive shikigami who was hidden to guard her master, Kon.

"What is it?" Harutora asked back and Touji next to him noticed something strange first.

"Huh? A simple shikigami?"

A folded piece of paper flapped its wings like a butterfly, approaching Harutora and the others. It was a simple shikigami, one type of shikigami.

The simple shikigami flew up next to Harutora and the others, suddenly stopping its movements. Harutora quickly reached out and grabbed the falling piece of paper.

The paper - no, looking carefully, he noticed that it was a white envelope.

"What is it, someone else sending a love letter to Natsume?"

Touji's tone was sarcastic, and Natsume seemed troubled, her cheeks slightly flushing red.

Natsume's looks were handsome and her grades didn't shame her famous reputation. She was an outstanding student who was a center of attention on the Onmyou

Academy. There were rumors that the male students had ambiguous feelings for her, which hadn't affected her negatively for some reason.

"But, this is really strange. I never received this kind of thing before you two entered." Natsume spoke in wonder.

Natsume had been wrapped up by ominous 'rumors' for a long time. Basically, she gave off a cold presence that wasn't easy to approach, and hence no one dared to rashly get close to her even though she was such a center of attention.

Touji grinned when he heard that.

"Idiot, it's all thanks to us."

"What does that mean?"

"The next heir to the Tsuchimikado main family was originally high up, but he was pulled down by us two transfer students to the level of a commoner. Also, you're not posing as much as before - so you've become much easier to approach."

"Wh, What posing, how rude." Unaccepting, Natsume refuted Touji's remark, but perhaps her own heart had already realized it, as her tone was obviously not very self-confident. Touji shrugged his shoulders noncommittally.

"Always gilding yourself isn't as good as relying on your true nature. In the end, your true side will be liked the best whether the others are male or female."

"......Hmph, that's not convincing at all when you say it, don't you act cool from morning till night."

"That's where you're wrong, that's just the charm I was born with."

Natsume stared at the serious-faced Touji, shaking her head.

"Anyway, I can't return a letter to her even if I refuse her - Harutora, who wrote that letter..... Huh? Harutora?"

Natsume turned around, blinking her eyes, and suddenly noticed that Harutora who had just been next to her had disappeared somewhere.

".....That's weird, Touji, where's Harutora?"

".....I don't know either." Touji's face was also perplexed and he looked around.

"Could he have gone to the bathroom?"

"I'm not sure."

The two of them looked at each other in incomprehension.

Harutora only finally returned to the classroom right before the afternoon classes started.

He claimed that his stomach had suddenly started hurting, and told the worried Natsume to return to the dorms first after school ended, hurriedly rushing to the toilet.

After Natsume left the academy building, the truth behind Harutora's unusual actions was immediately revealed.

"That love letter was to you?"

"That's right! The mail during lunch was a love letter to me, not to Natsume, a love letter to me!"

"That person was way too careless, how could he have mistaken the name of the receiver--"

"You're saying that she got it wrong without even asking? The contents of the letter clearly say it was for me!"

Harutora was excitedly talking with Touji in the bottom of the emergency stairwell behind the academy building. Their classmate Momoe Tenma was also next to Touji, who had also been called to this place by Harutora's text message. Tenma seemed to not understand what exactly was going on, listening blankly to Harutora's torrent of words.

"......Uh, so Harutora-kun received a love letter? Who sent it?"

"It seems like a second-year senpai called Kinoshita Jun. Tenma, do you know who that is?"

"No, I've never heard of her."

"Ugh, I see, I called you over because I thought you would know....." Regret instantly flashed over Harutora's face, but he quickly regained his excited expression. "Anyway, seeing as someone gave me a love letter when there are rumors flying around, there are still people who don't believe that nonsense. Once I noticed the love letter was to me, it felt like I hit a game-changing grand slam, as if all my past actions were forgiven....." He clenched his right hand in front of his chest as he spoke about his mixed feelings.

Touji helplessly scratched his head above his trademark bandanna.

"......So you called us out here just for this kind of thing."

"Don't be so cold, Touji, can you at least give me your opinion?"

"If you want to find someone to talk, why don't you go find Natsume."

"How could I! Also, isn't this the kind of thing one discusses with other guys?!"

Though it wasn't something to be proud of, this was his first time receiving a love letter, and it was impossible for him to calm down. It had been hard for him to feign calmness during the afternoon classes, too.

"......Harutora-kun? You said you wanted to talk with a guy, so isn't that more of a reason to call Natsume-kun here too?"

"Huh? ...Ah! No, I meant.....!"

Tenma's words held reason, and Harutora only now realized his mistake. Touji helplessly saved him as if he were staring at an unredeemable idiot.

"Tenma, you know how serious and outstanding Natsume is, but his mind's a bit inflexible."

"Yeah, that's true....."

"And Harutora's a dunce."

"Th, That's true too....."

"Harutora became Natsume's shikigami because of the Tsuchimikado family tradition. That stubborn Natsume definitely won't permit his stupid shikigami to busy himself with things outside of Onmyoudou, especially something like a relationship."

"Is he really that stubborn? I didn't know that....." Tenma nodded in admiration. There were many points of this explanation that Harutora was dissatisfied with, but in the end he had misspoken, so he couldn't say any more.

"Right, Harutora, you said you wanted to talk with us, so what exactly are you thinking?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about!"

"Honestly, you could just give it up without blood being shed....."

"Uh - Wait, Touji, is there a reason why you said something so ominous?"

"Alright alright, I'm jealous of you for being so well-liked by girls, Harutora-kun."

"Huh? R, Really? I'm not actually that well-liked though."

"If you truly were well-liked, you wouldn't find us to talk as soon as you got a love letter."

"Ah....."

"Shut up, Touji. You too, Tenma, don't accept it that quickly!"

Harutora had originally smiled bashfully, but now he frowned angrily. Touji shrugged his shoulders in disinterest.

"So? What did the love letter say? Did she ask you to go out with her?"

".....Ah, no, she asked me whether I had time to meet her during the holiday tomorrow."

"In that case, go meet her."

"Th, That's true, but what do I do after meeting her....."

"You can watch a movie or eat a meal--"

"Wouldn't that become a date!"

"What? Isn't she inviting you to a date?"

"Huh? Ah, so that's what it was, so that's what meeting meant....."

Tenma asked back in surprise and Harutora's forehead sweated as he mumbled a reply. It seemed like he hadn't thought that far ahead.

"But..... A date, that..... Hm."

"What is it? You don't like dates?"

"It, It's not that I don't like them....."

Tenma stared in wonder at the quietly mumbling Harutora, then uttered an "Ah", his face momentarily lighting up.

"I know, Harutora-kun, there's actually someone you like."

Harutora's face instantly blushed when he heard that.

"Th, There isn't! There's no one that I particularly like--"

"Oh, really? Then why are you so nervous! It's not like she asked to go out with you, she just wants to meet you."

"I, I'm not actually nervous, I don't really care--"

".....What? Harutora-kun, so you really only like little girls....."

"That's not it! And what does that 'really' mean?"

Harutora and Tenma chatted in a buzz, and Touji stood to the side helplessly. His appearance as he watched the two was like a college student whose parents had forced him to watch over children of their relatives.

Not long after they started chatting, Tenma came up with a conclusion.

"Anyway, even though she's a senpai, it was a girl's love letter after all, so you had better not stand her up. Never mind what you're going to do after you meet, you should first go meet her."

".....O, Okay. After all, I can't just let her wait there."

Harutora nodded his head with a stiff face. It couldn't be told whether he was excited or tense, and maybe it was both of those. Then, Harutora spoke with Tenma again, but Touji looked at Harutora with a rare complex expression.

"......I have a bad feeling." Touji muttered. Unfortunately, those words didn't reach Harutora's ears.

"......Oh, so that's what was going on....."

The dead of night.

Natsume stood by the window in her dorm room, whispering quietly.

The light inside of the room was reflected, and the window showed Natsume's face like a mirror. Her eyes were narrowed, her gaze like ice, keeping anything from showing on her face. Sometimes, it was hard for her to keep her lips from curling.

"I thought his attitude during the day was suspicious..... So that's what it was....."

Natsume's voice was unusually calm, but if Harutora heard it, his hair would definitely be standing up in fright.

The window didn't only reflect Natsume's figure. It also showed a small figure behind her back. For some reason, that person had her back to Natsume. A pair of pointed ears poked out from her head, and a leaf-shaped tail grew out from behind her back.

"......Thank you for coming to tell me about this matter, Kon, this information is extremely valuable."

"......There's nothing to thank me for, I was just talking to myself."

"Ah, that's right, you weren't revealing a secret, you just 'happened' to be 'talking to yourself' about what happened today."

Natsume and Kon spoke far-fetched words with their backs to each other. Their voices were empty but concealed a force to be reckoned with.

"......This unknown girl... Though she's a student, she is still an Onmyoudou user trying to get close to the master I have pledged to protect. This would certainly cause great inconvenience to me as a retainer..... But as a mere shikigami, I dare not transgress."

"Yeah, that's true. It seems like I've misunderstood you before. You're an extremely excellent shikigami, Harutora is very fortunate....." Natsume smiled lightly as she said this, her voice still calm, but it was doubtful whether the expression on her face could be described as a smile.....

"Alright, I should be sleeping now. Tomorrow seems like it will be a busy day."

The dead of midnight.

Touji's premonition was realized. The bloody holiday was about to unfold.

"Ah, Harutora-kun! You really came! Hello, I'm Kinoshita Jun."

"Oh, h-hello."

Eleven in the morning, in front of a certain building in Shinjuku.

Harutora inadvertently doubted his own eyes at having a girl call him out from among a sea of people. Frankly, he held some expectations, but the girl was unexpectedly cute, far surpassing his imagination.

She had shoulder-length light brown hair and eyes dressed up with sophisticated makeup. She wore a simple white coat on the outside, and a pair of pretty legs wearing black stockings extended from underneath her short skirt and into pink low boots.

She was small and couldn't be counted as a 'mature woman', more like 'cute' instead. In particular, her lively movements and expression were very much like a girl's.

Harutora happened to like this type of girl, and he finally realized that he was incredibly tense.

"But..... It's really great that you were willing to come, I was so worried."

"Huh, w-why?"

"After all..... There's a lot of gossip regarding you recently."

"Oh, that's all nonsense! It's the dorm managers spreading rumors everywhere!"

Harutora defended himself forcefully. Jun seemed a bit hesitant upon hearing that.

"None of it is real?"

"That's right! Didn't I come to meet you today?'

"I see, but then....." Jun murmured, her face thoughtful.

"Wh, What? What's wrong?"

"Ah, sorry, it's nothing. Anyway, thank you, Harutora-kun. Let's have fun today." Jun smiled lightly after saying that and Harutora inadvertently replied: "Yeah." Maybe feeling that his response was funny, Jun broke out into laughter again.

Harutora's face reddened and a strange feeling rushed through his heart, part embarrassment and part joy.

However, in the next second--

A cold feeling shot through his entire body--

"...Uh."

His expression changed and a frightful chill ran through his back. He frantically turned around to look.

"......What happened, Harutora-kun?"

"Ah, s-sorry, I was just a bit....." Harutora hastily searched for excuses, replying vaguely to the shocked Jun. He sized up the surroundings for the sake of caution, not noticing anything strange. "......It's nothing, I was just overthinking things."

"I see. Then, let's go." Jin strode forth briskly after saying this and Harutora recovered his calm, leaving along with her.

Only then did the holiday truly begin.

"......Ah, they left, Touji-kun!" Tenma hid himself behind a tree, secretly watching Harutora and Jun's movements while excitedly speaking with a quiet voice. "I didn't

think it would be such a cute girl, I'm so jealous of Harutora-kun. But Harutora-kun seems like he's so tense! .....Haha, I didn't really want to follow someone else on his date originally..... But it's actually pretty exciting!"

Tenma's eyes lit up. Touji had invited him to secretly observe Harutora during his date 'just in case'. At the start, he hadn't been too willing, but now he was completely into it.

"Touji-kun, let's quickly follow them!" He turned around after saying that, but noticed that Touji's gaze wasn't on Harutora for some reason. In addition, his brow was even furrowed as he looked around, his expression giving off anxiety and tension.

"What's wrong? Didn't Harutora-kun and the girl leave? Besides, aren't you afraid of our movements being too obvious and them noticing us?" Tenma asked worriedly.

However, Touji didn't answer his question.

".....Tenma, do you feel some kind of unusual atmosphere around?"

"Atmosphere? Not spiritual or magical energy?"

"Right, it's nothing specific, it's more like a killing intent or anger....." It was rare for Touji to say things that weren't clear, and he continued carefully watching the surroundings, but ended up finding nothing. "Let's go." He clicked his tongue, urging Tenma to move.

"What is it? Do you think we shouldn't be following them secretly?"

".....No, just the opposite. Though things shouldn't come to it..... Be prepared."

"B, Be prepared?"

"Right, never mind Harutora, I'm worried about that girl."

"I don't think Harutora-kun would do anything to a girl."

"Harutora wouldn't....." Touji murmured words dismally. "Anyway, it's right to keep our eyes on those two. Right, have you still not contacted Kurahashi?"

"Yeah, she said she was busy today....."

Kurahashi Kyouko was the classmate of Touji and the others, the eldest daughter of the famous Kurahashi family, whose Onmyoudou power was second only to Natsume in the class.

"But, is there really a need to call Kurahashi-san? I don't know what Harutora-kun thinks, but we should only involve guys with this kind of thing....."

"Don't think too much about it, hurry up and contact her. If things go sour, just the two of us won't be able to deal with it."

"Huh."

Tenma was confused, but Touji's face was extremely grave as he secretly chased after Harutora and the girl.

"A, Are you alright, Harutora-kun?"

".....I, I'm okay. That strong wind just now blew a signboard over and it almost hit me, but fortunately I just barely avoided it....."

The surroundings were in a clamor. The signboard rolled across an asphalt ramp, the surprised pedestrians hastily avoiding it. Fortunately, Harutora had escaped unharmed. He broke out in a cold sweat as he looked at the signboard in the distance that had just brushed past his nose.

"That was close, did they not attach the signboard properly?"

"......Maybe."

"But, that's strange, there wasn't any wind just now - It's the same right now, I can't even feel a breeze."

"......Yeah."

Harutora replied listlessly, his face pale.

Similar unexpected events had already happened several times.

After Harutora and Jun met up, they had gone to a fashionable terraced cafe that Jun recommended to eat lunch, though it was a bit early.

However, once they entered the store, the waiter had immediately fallen and dumped a glass of water on Harutora. As soon as he sat on the chair the waiter brought, he had immediately fallen onto the ground because the chair was broken. Then, as he was preparing to eat, bird poop just happened to fall into the dishes. Though they had changed the dishes later, bugs had constantly been flying back and forth while they ate, circling around Harutora.

Those weren't the only surprises.

Once he walked next to Jun, his shoelaces broke.

Once they walked into a small alley, he was attacked by wild cats.

Once they walked into a clothing store, the mannequins fell over.

Once they walked into an arcade, the arcade lost power.

The benches in the park had wet paint.

The vending machines broke down and didn't give them change.

The branches of trees suddenly fell down.

Strange smells permeated the air.

In addition, there were countless small surprises, and something would suddenly happen every time Harutora and Jun were chatting happily or when they almost held hands. Also, the level of danger had been steadily rising, like the signboard shooting at his face just now. If it had truly hit, the aftermath would have been disastrous.

Harutora had been born unfortunate. He knew that he was unlucky from first-hand experience. However, today's situation was far too unusual, as one misfortune happened after another. In particular, after he met Jun, he had constantly felt some kind of chill coming from somewhere, as if there were some unusual pressure behind his back. It was completely different from the imagined paranoia from yesterday in the cafeteria, as it was more genuine, more dangerous, and more crazed.

"It looks like today's a bit unusual, Harutora-kun. You must be disappointed, right?"

"What? That's not true! I should be apologizing to you, since weird things keep happening."

"I'm alright. Harutora-kun, you're really gentle."

"That's not--"

As soon as an embarrassed smile emerged on Harutora's face, strong winds whipped up around them. Jun cried out, hastily holding down her hair, but Harutora's hair was blown around everywhere, a chill still running through him.

"E, Excuse me for a bit!" After saying this, Harutora rapidly left Jun's side. "......Kon! Kon, are you here? Don't you think there's someone messing around in the shadows?" He lowered his voice to ask for his shikigami's opinion. But, "Kon..... That's weird? Kon?" Kon, who had always answered when he had asked before, didn't speak up, and Harutora's back went cold in fright.

"......I am here."

"Kon! So you were here, don't scare me! .....Hey, don't you think this situation isn't quite right? I feel like my life's in danger."

".....I see."

"Don't brush me off! Aren't you my guardian? Have you noticed anything unusual?" Harutora wanted to check, but Kon just said: "Nothing is out of the ordinary."

".....R, Really?"

"Yes, nothing is out of the ordinary..... If the situation becomes grave enough to endanger you, I will guard you with my life, so be at ease."

"I see, that's good....."

".....I will take my leave....."

After saying this, Kon's voice vanished again. "Huh." Harutora's face sank. Maybe he would have noticed that Kon hadn't been stammering like before if he wasn't plagued by this strange chill. At the same time, he hadn't heard the shikigami's 'other meaning'. He walked back to Jun's side.

"Harutora-kun, are you okay?" Jun's face was worried.

"Yeah, I'm alright, sorry for making you worry."

Jun's concern moved him, and he forced himself to smile, scratching his chin to conceal his embarrassment. "Ah." Once she saw Harutora's hand, Jun quickly cried out.

"Harutora-kun, your hand is hurt!"

"What? Ahh, I put my hand out to block the signboard just now - It's alright, it's just a small bruise."

"You can't ignore it, let me have a look." Jun pulled Harutora's right hand, taking out a handkerchief and carefully wrapping it on the wound. Jun's small hands moved

deftly, continuously touching Harutora's hand, and the soft fragrance of shampoo wafted from her hair.

"...Okay. But it's best to disinfect it as soon as possible--"

After wrapping it, Jun lifted her head and their gazes intersected at a close distance. Once Jun noticed the situation, her face tinted red, and Harutora also blushed in embarrassment.

They stared at each other, and silence spread, and immediately after--

An earthquake happened.

The ground suddenly shook and a fissure appeared in the asphalt road. Jun screamed in shock, stumbling backwards, and Harutora lost his balance for a moment, inadvertently tumbling to the ground. The two of them separated, and the earthquake calmed down at the same time.

"......This is....."

Harutora knelt on the ground, stunned, unable to help but look around. He noticed that there was a pair of lovers in the distance looking at him, unable to conceal the shock on their faces.

It seemed that the earthquake had happened with an extremely limited scale - more accurately, it seemed that it had only happened in the location of Harutora and Jun. A crack was split open in a space very close to the two of them as if the ground had been sabotaged.

"......Kon? This is.....?" Harutora asked with a hoarse voice.

"Nothing is out of the ordinary."

Her tone sounded like it didn't count as abnormal because it had been the road that was split instead of Harutora.

Something was wrong.

Even the slow Harutora had to admit that the situation was indeed strange.

"You still haven't contacted Kurahashi?"

"Sh, She hasn't responded to my message."

Touji's tone wasn't leisurely at all as he asked. Noise sounded all around him, and a signboard rolled down a slope. Touji's gaze was worried as he looked at the destroyed signboard.

"......What I was worrying about happened after all....."

"T, Touji-kun. Maybe I'm overthinking things, but I feel like I've been constantly feeling magical energy since just now.....?"

"Don't worry about it. You don't need to wait for Kurahashi to reply to your message, you should just call her directly and tell her to come over. It might be too late if we wait any longer."

In the direction that the signboard had come from, Jun was using a handkerchief to bandage him, maybe because Harutora had been hurt. Touji hid in the corner of the street, watching the two of them in boredom.

"......Damn, we could do something if we could chase down the source of the magical energy, but unfortunately the magical energy was too weak. She's using stealth magic, this top student's really hard to deal with....."

"No good, Touji-kun! I can't reach Kurahashi-san's phone."

"In that case, we can only pray that things get resolved before the surroundings get damaged even more severely..... Like a fire or a building collapse....."

"......Building collapse?" Upon hearing his classmate speak so exaggeratedly, Tenma couldn't help but grin, thinking that those words were a joke..... Unfortunately, Touji didn't have any trace of a smile on his face.

"Thing will be difficult if they're using a shikigami from afar..... But considering that person's personality, she definitely can't hold her temper, and she should be nearby....." Touji also hid himself as he said this, carefully sizing up the surroundings again.

Touji never hated to get his feet wet, and the more troublesome things got, the happier he was. But, he really couldn't be relaxed while watching the storm this time, or else the rare holiday would be completely destroyed.

"That idiot Harutora, he won't go out with that girl anyway, so he should hurry up and brush her off."

"H, He won't? Harutora-kun really has someone that he likes?"

"I don't know what he thinks." Touji frowned, uttering that remark.

In the next second, "Huh? A, An earthquake?" Vibrations rumbled underneath his feet, but the degree of shaking wasn't large, and he could only faintly feel light vibration when he was standing still. However, right in front of Touji and Tenma, Harutora tumbled down violently and Jun also staggered, the ground shaking significantly.

An extremely small-scale, local earthquake - No.....

".....Th, This really is magic! Also, I think I hear someone's voice chanting 'order'.....?" Tenma's eyes widened and Touji immediately rushed out from the street

corner where he hid, charging towards the area behind a tree on the other side of the road.

There was no one there.

No, there was someone here.

He looked intently, finally understanding the scene in front of him. In addition, with that glance, he wondered how on earth he hadn't noticed there was someone 'right there' for the entire time. That person was using stealth magic.

That person had stuffed her hair into a rather large baseball cap and wore a pair of sunglasses that looked very cheap at first glance. She wore loose athletic clothing that didn't suit her at all.

Touji, who had hurried forward, sighed.

"So it really is you. Don't go too far, Nat--"

"Shut up!"

Once he heard that extremely tense tone that wouldn't allow any opposition, Touji couldn't help but flinch. Natsume didn't even turn around to glance at him, clasping the tree as if she couldn't wait to peel off the bark, glaring angrily in the direction of Harutora.

"......N-Natsume?" Touji's face went rigid and he called out gingerly.

"......This..... This is intolerable..... I really can't stand this..... I can't take it..... I can't take it any more..... Bastard..... Stupid idiot..... That stupid-- Baka-- Tora!"

Aura poured from Natsume's entire body and swirled into a giant eddy as if the stealth magic lost its effectiveness completely in the face of her anger, or perhaps as if she didn't care about hiding anymore.

Tenma ran up from the other side of the road.

"Touji-kun, why did you suddenly - huh? Natsume-kun? Why are you dressed like that? Are you following Harutora-kun as well--"

"Order!"

"Guh."

"Hey, Tenma!"

Natsume threw out a charm without turning around, which hit Tenma perfectly in the forehead. Touji hastily grabbed his collapsing classmate. He hadn't expected that Natsume would be this unreasonable.

"Tenma, get a hold of yourself. Natsume! You're going too far--"

"......Gg......rr......rr......rrrrrrrr."

"--Actually, it's okay, yeah, it's still at an acceptable level....."

Natsume bared her teeth and growled like a wild beast, staring her childhood friend like a devil's face. Touji unconsciously swallowed.

"......N-Natsume, I understand your feelings, so why don't you calm down a bit first. Breathe deeply, calm--"

"Me? I-- am-- calm!"

"...Okay, okay, you're very calm, extremely calm. Anyway, breathe deeply first, come on."

Touji tried to persuade Natsume with a gentle tone, as if he were pacifying a wild leopard. Natsume's gaze still stared intently at Harutora and Jun, and she breathed deeply and then exhaled slowly.

Taking advantage of that moment, Touji hastily checked Tenma's condition. Though he had lost consciousness, he was still breathing, so it looked like he had just fainted. Touji hesitated over whether he should remove the charm on Tenma's head, and in

the end decided to leave it that way. Anyway, even if Tenma woke up right now, he feared that he would just see many things that it was better not to.

He draped Tenma's arm around his own neck.

"Hey, Natsume? That's not a date, they're just - meeting and chatting a bit, so you don't need to worry--"

"I'm not worrying!"

"...Yes, of course you're not, okay, you're not worrying at all. If you were worried, you wouldn't have hit him with a signboard or caused an earthquake, you're completely right..... But, as I said just now, there's truly nothing between them, it's just students meeting up and chatting, nothing big. So you don't need to worry or be mad--"

"I'm not mad!"

"--Yes, yes, I know, you're not worried and you're not mad, that's great." Touji spoke with a smile, his temple frequently pulsing. He felt like he was negotiating with a criminal whose body was strapped up with bombs.

"Th, That handkerchief..... To think he would take it as a gift..... And he even wrapped it around his hand.....!" The suicide bomber stared intently at Harutora.

".....I really wonder who hurt him."

".....Wh, Why is he so embarrassed..... They..... look so lovey-dovey.....!"

".....It looks to me like he's pale from fright."

"Ah, they're leaving again! Are they planning on moving to another place?"

".....I think it's escaping rather than moving....."

"Escape as much as you want! I didn't sleep at all yesterday, my preparations are seamless! Don't think you can escape my grasp even if you run to the ends of the earth!"

".....There's no helping this person, I'd better think of something fast....." Touji murmured deeply, his face grave. Of course, those words didn't reach Natsume's

ears. In order to chase Harutora and Jun who had left again, Natsume immediately rose to leave her spot behind the tree.

"Wait, Natsume." Touji hastily spoke up.

"I can't!"

"Just listen then. Why are you following Harutora? Why do you need to watch him secretly?"

"......Why?" Touji changed his style of questioning. Natsume was surprised by his words, questioning herself. Naturally, Touji didn't let that 'weak point' go.

"Right, do you have any reason to interfere with who Harutora meets?"

"H, Harutora-kun is my--!"

"Yes, Harutora is your shikigami, but he's not a 'personal item', and that's not enough of a reason for you to follow him around behind his back and meddle from the shadows." Touji cut to the chase, as if he were talking about love with elementary schoolers. But truthfully, the levels of those two were that low, so he could do nothing else.

Natsume's gaze finally left Harutora and Jun when her faults were pointed out. She lowered her head, lightly biting her lip, like his words had hit the mark.

Touji keenly changed his tone when he observed this.

"Natsume, I don't hate that stubborn personality of yours, but..... It's best to be a little honest in this kind of time."

"Honest....."

"Right, it does no good to continue this deadlock. You need to speak your true feelings occasionally."

"....." Natsume was silent for a long while, her head still lowered.

Right now was the crucial point where victory was decided. Touji didn't say anything more, quietly waiting for Natsume's response.

Not long after, Natsume slowly raised her head. She took off her sunglasses, a light smile emerging on her lips as she said without hesitation: "A shikigami is the practitioner's property."

"....."

The eyes that Natsume stared at Touji with were frighteningly clear, like a vacuum that didn't permit any life. It seemed that she had already gone insane.

"I'm going after them, any problems?"

"......Whatever you want."

The ineffable sense of futility made Touji feel like he had aged ten years in the blink of an eye. He shifted Tenma's posture, putting him on his back again.

No way.

Actually, Harutora had a feeling a long time ago, but he had deliberately ignored it. He didn't think that such a possibility was impossible, but he avoided it and didn't dare think about it.

Now, 'no way' was slowly turning into 'as expected'.

As expected.

This kind of situation..... really was.....

"Harutora-kun?"

"......Could it be..... I, It's really Natsume....."

"Hey, Harutora-kun!"

Harutora only came to his senses when Jun called out like this.

The two of them were in a coffee shop near the south entrance of JR Shinjuku Station. They had brought two beverages outside and were sitting by the flowerbed off to the side. The sun slowly moved west and streetlights lit the road one by one.

"S, Sorry, what is it?"

"I wanted to say thanks to you. Thanks for being with me the whole day and listening to me." Jun spoke in a huff, but the eyes that looked at Harutora were full of happiness. Harutora replied: "Sorry."

The day was about to end.

But, this day hadn't ended, and Harutora didn't believe that things would wrap up like this. He held the iced coffee, trying to stabilize his emotions, but he couldn't regulate his breathing and his hand was shaking. He gritted his teeth, forcefully clenching his molars tight.

He hadn't done anything wrong, so he could hold his head high and proud. He didn't have to be scared..... at least, that should have been true.

Unfortunately, the current situation wasn't very hopeful and wasn't one that could be resolved relying on such childish reasons. Harutora sweated furiously.

"......Harutora~kun?"

"Ah, s-sorry."

Harutora snapped out of his trance again, hastily apologizing. Jun pouted deliberately, but immediately broke out into a smile again.

"Harutora-kun, you've been apologizing the whole day."

"S, Seems like it, sorr--"

"Look, you're doing it again." Jun giggled, her naive appearance managing to soften Harutora's knot of tension.

Thinking carefully, this was the first time in the whole day he had been alone with this girl he had just met. Since he was tense anyway, at least he hoped that it could be a different feeling of tension..... Harutora couldn't help but think this funny when he thought of it.

".....Harutora-kun, what do you think of me?" As if noticing the moment when his feelings relaxed, Jun's expression suddenly became sober, her tone quite serious.

"What?"

"After being with me for the whole day, do you think you would want to go out with me?"

Jun stared straight into Harutora's eyes. Harutora couldn't say anything for a while. He had nowhere to run.

The time he spent together with Jun flashed across his mind. Though he had attracted quite some trouble, Jun had never once showed an unwilling expression, working hard until the very end to let the two of them have a great time. She had been impeccable.

In this kind of situation, Harutora immediately regained his calm, flinging off his panic and confusion to return the most important answer.

".....I was very happy when I got your letter, thank you."

"--!" Jun's eyes widened and her lips pressed tightly together.

The most important reason why Harutora had come today was because he wanted to 'thank' her face-to-face.

Jun understood the meaning in his words, hearing that he had already decided the answer from the beginning. But she didn't give up, still trying to convey her heartfelt emotion.

But just then--

"Yo, Harutora! 'What a coincidence'!"

A mechanical and empty voice made him shudder, and Harutora's body temperature dropped rapidly - you could even say he froze over. That voice drove his consciousness far away, and it wouldn't be strange for its hidden power to be classified as an 'incantation'.

"......Nat......sume....."

"Haha, really Harutora, is there a need to be that shocked?"

"......This is a misunderstanding."

"No, I'm not misunderstanding anything."

"It's really not like you're thinking! I, uh.....!"

"You don't need to say any more, I know what's going on very well. Anyway, why don't we go back to the dorm first?" Natsume's tone was cheerful and a smile was hung on her face, but there was no happiness in her eyes at all.

Harutora was incredibly scared.

"Kon? Kon?"

"......Yes."

"My life's in danger!"

"Natsume-dono is Harutora-sama's master, I do not know why Harutora-sama says that--"

"Why do you only take her side in this kind of time? Also, I only noticed just now, you're not stuttering when you talk! Was it you who went off to inform her!?"

"......Harutora."

"Ahh! Touji! And Tenma too! Why are you with Natsume--"

"I came to pick up your remains."

"Does that mean that there's no room for negotiation?"

The sudden betrayal of his shikigami and his best friend made Harutora momentarily fall into a panic.

However-- "Natsume-kun, could you please leave?" Jun showed a sharp gaze, blocking Natsume's path. Harutora cried out in surprise, trying to stop Jun's reckless action - unexpectedly, Natsume was the one who was startled. The current Natsume was clearly panicked.

"Harutora-kun and I are on a date, so if you want to go back, please go back on your own."

"N, No! Harutora is my shikigami--"

"So what? I just want to go out with Harutora-kun, I'm not planning to replace you as Harutora-kun's master."

"N, No! I definitely won't permit that! Because Harutora--"

"Because what? Could it be that you forbid your shikigami from love? What gives you the right to say such a thing?"

"Because I'm Harutora's master!"

"I said--" Jun smiled sweetly, like a martial arts master relaxing her whole body's strength to face a battle. "Can you call that a reason for banning him from love? Well, alright, if you're that concerned about public opinion, I'm okay with going out in secret."

"....."

Natsume's body trembled in anger, staring at Jun with tear-filled eyes.

An expression of realization suddenly flashed across Touji's face as he carried Tenma on his back. He finally understood the reason Natsume couldn't control herself and saw the secret hidden underneath the anger.

Natsume was scared. The Onmyou Academy's proud prodigy couldn't refute a thing and was only able to stand there blankly. Jun slowly breathed in as if to calm down her agitated emotions. A pressing atmosphere pervaded the silence, but the person to break the silence wasn't Natsume, nor was it Jun.

".....Kinoshita-san, I'm sorry."

Jun's whole body shook when Harutora's voice came from behind her. Just then--

"Huh, Natsume-kun? Why are you here?"

An excited voice completely incompatible with the atmosphere rang out, coming from a place farther behind Natsume, Touji, and the others. Everyone present looked towards the owner of the voice, stunned.

"Kurahashi?" Touji's eyes widened in surprise.

"Touji? .....Ah, and Tenma. Come to think of it, he sent me a message. I forgot to respond."

It was their classmate, Kurahashi Kyouko. She had a relaxed demeanor as if she hadn't noticed the present atmosphere, happily looking at the group present.

"Oh my, that's strange, Kinoshita-senpai? You're dressed up like that again... You couldn't be thinking of making a move on Natsume-kun, right? That won't do, Natsume-kun is very pure, you can't trick him like you always do!"

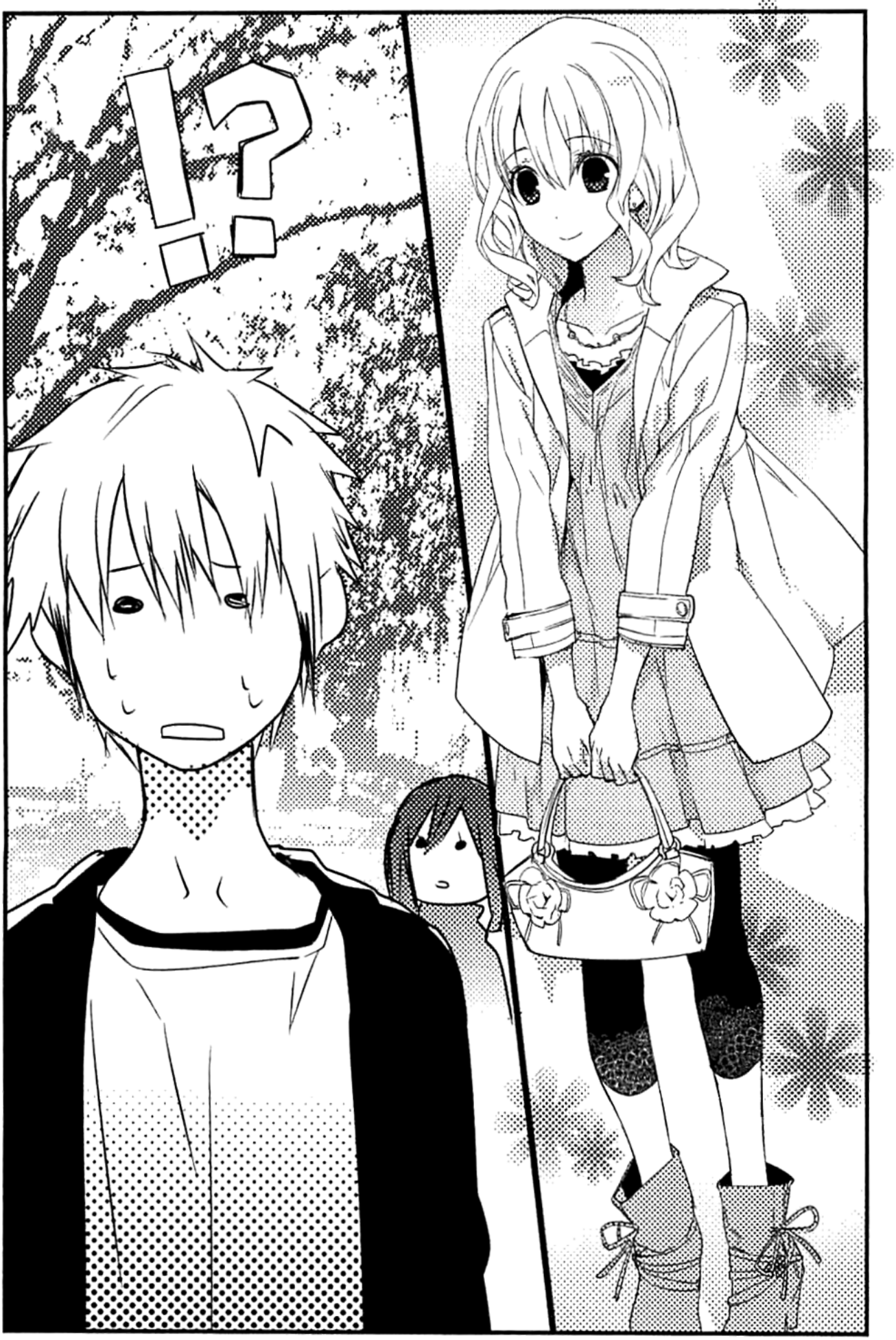
They seemed to know each other. Kyouko spoke leisurely - but Jun's expression wavered. "K, Kyouko-chan?"

"Do you know each other?" Touji asked in surprise.

"You mean senpai? Yeah, we occasionally chat about things like cosmetics, because - Look, he's dressed up so cutely, he doesn't look like a guy at all."

Natsume, Touji, Harutora, and even Kon had the same reaction.

"......A guy?"



The rather unprecedented atmosphere made them all breathless. Jun's face flushed red.

"S-So what? What's wrong with that! Society accepts 'otoko no musume' right now. I can love who I want, and no one can criticize me!" Jun proclaimed loudly. Harutora was stunned silent, and Kon by his side also forgot her stealth, materializing. Tenma fell from Touji's shoulder. "......Oh my~" Kyouko noticed that she seemed to have said something bad, covering her mouth with her hand.

Jun fell to the ground on his knees, his hands against the ground. ".....So what.....So what! What's wrong with a guy! It's fine as long as I'm cute! Aren't I right, Harutora-kun?"

Jun kneeled on the ground looking up at Harutora, but Harutora didn't rush forward, his entire body pale as if the blood had been sucked out of him. His iced coffee dripped down.

An indescribable silence spread out.

In the silence, "Kinoshita-senpai..... I'm sorry." Natsume opened her mouth.

She looked at Jun with teary eyes, the meaning of these tears different from the ones in her eyes before. These were from a deep, unilateral sense of 'sympathy'.

".....I understand, I understand completely. I misjudged senpai, I never thought senpai would be 'the same'....."

A question mark appeared on Jun's face, and Touji's cheeks twitched slightly.

Natsume and Jun were camouflaging their original gender, but she didn't understand the difference between them. She hadn't understood at all, and perhaps she didn't even know the meaning of 'otoko no musume'. Most serious of all, she didn't even know she actually didn't understand the other party.

It was simply... irrevocably stupid.

"Kinoshita-senpai, I..... I'm very moved! I didn't think senpai would have this kind of secret.....! Let me apologize for my actions from before, please let me be your friend!"

"What? Don't joke around! I won't make friends with someone who's prettier than me!"

"Please don't say that!"

"I refuse! Harutora-kun, save me!"

"....."

Jun pleaded Harutora, who was looking into the sky, stunned. Natsume reached out in tears.

Kon hid herself again without a word, her face bitter.

Kyouko still didn't get the situation, looking towards Touji with an ".....Uh, this is..... What exactly is going on?"

Touji put Tenma back on his back, replying with a firm tone that said that whatever happened wouldn't shake his will:

"I'm outta here."